

रामायणम् of Valmiki

Condensed from Sanskrit and Transcreated into English by

P LAL



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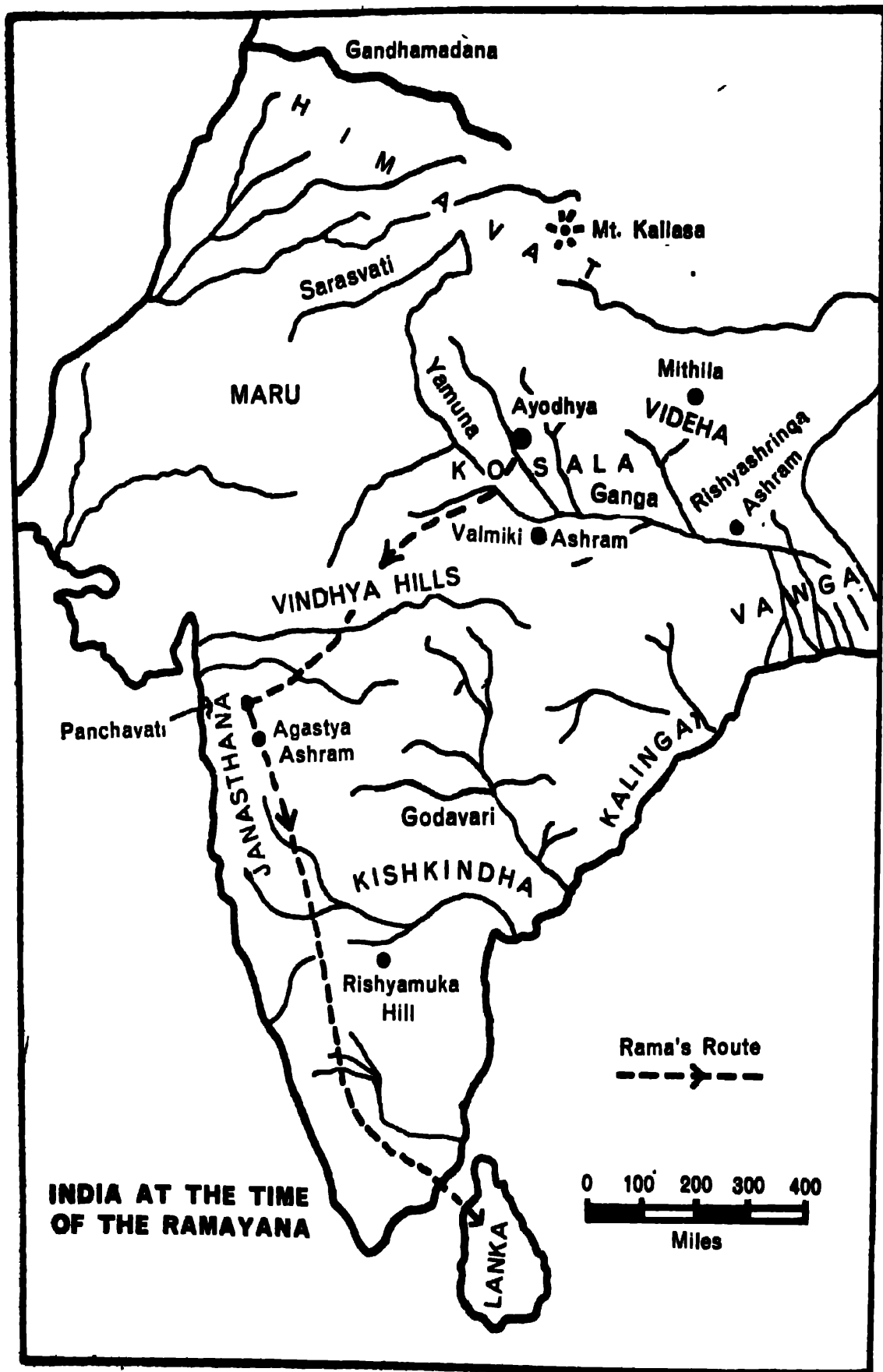
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**This
transcreation
is dedicated
with love
to
S I T A
model
of
Indian womanhood
lady
of purity and delight
daughter
of the fragrant earth
speaker
of sweet wisdom**

**“It may take a hundred years coming,
but joy surely comes to every man.”**

एति जीवन्तमानन्दो नरं वर्षशतादपि ।

[“Sundara-Kanda”: “The Auspicious Book” XXXIV 6]



Preface

This transcreation was planned as a companion volume to my condensed English version of *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*, published by Vikas in 1980. It employs the same principles of, let me say, approach and handling; I eschew the term “methodology”—too fancy and grandiose a description for what was intended to be really just a pleasure-giving version of Valmiki’s epic.

As with Vyasa in my version of *The Mahabharata*, I let Valmiki speak for himself. He speaks sweetly and lyrically. I have not expanded, adapted, interpreted or, in any way other than shortening by editing, imposed on the Sanskrit original. I am aware that abbreviation itself often becomes a kind of interpretation. This version is simply Valmiki’s epic reduced to a one-third story-line, always in Valmiki’s own words. Large chunks have been omitted from Books I and VII, because there is little critical doubt that these two books are later interpolations, often bowdlerisations, and many episodes described in them tend to bog the narrative flow of the epic.

I have genuflected to the oral tradition by selecting passages with vivid dramatic qualities, memorable lyrical touches, and stimulating character delineation. Where choice was possible, I have preferred concrete detail to generalised abstraction, humanist nuance to theological jargon, and moral anecdote to didactic punditry. Repetition, so essential to the oral mnemonic tradition, and justificatory padding, so common in the Brahminical Hindu tradition, constitute a large portion of the two-thirds omitted. That Tulsidas chose to deify Rama should not be an argument for misconstruing Valmiki. Valmiki’s Rama is intensely and fascinatingly human—and it is this aspect that I have chosen to stress. The modern reader will find

this approach more identifiable with—not, I hope, because he loves Rama the deity less but perhaps because he loves Rama the man more.

The structural, genealogical and other complexities of my *Mahabharata* version necessitated a long, interpreting introduction. The *Ramayana* is much shorter and, because of its compactness and other reasons, “simple”. I felt that Valmiki needs minimal annotation and explanation—which is why I have provided a very brief introduction to this volume. The speed of Valmiki’s story and the chastening clarity of its character-sketching—the *Mahabharata* has a cast of thousands, the *Ramayana* a very manageable handful of characters—speak for themselves. The less interposing and interpreting, the better.

Diacritical marks have been excluded in the main text of the translation; they are supplied in the Glossary and Bibliography. The internationally accepted system of Sanskrit-English transliteration has been followed, with four exceptions: श is indicated by “śh” instead of “ś”, ष by “ṣh” instead of “ṣ”, च as “ch” instead of “c”, and ऋ as “ṛi” instead of “ṛ”. Indian words included in the indispensable *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Unabridged) are not italicised in the text.

P.L.

Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to Sri Narendra Kumar of Vikas who visualised a sister volume to *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* even before that book was published in late 1980 and tied me down with a contract to, as they say, “do the needful”. Also to Sri Samuel Israel, an editor who has become a friend, for keeping me on the job with gentle and encouraging prods.

My wife helped with the preparation of the introduction and provided translations from Bengali material on controversies that have gathered round the *Ramayana*.

Priyamvada Devi drew my attention to the remarkable insights in V. S. Srinivasa Sastri’s *Lectures on the Ramayana* and procured for me a copy of that indispensable out-of-print volume. I have profited by discussing Valmiki’s epic with her, and the rendering of “Sundara Kanda” as “The Auspicious Book” is her suggestion.

Nandini Nopany compiled the Glossary and helped with its annotation. We have tried to make the Glossary as usefully comprehensive as possible. I thank her also for proof-reading the entire text of the transcreation.

I am grateful to Sri Paritosh Sen for agreeing to do the line drawings at very short notice. *

Sri Pradip Bhattacharya, Deputy Director of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, deluged me with *Ramayana* reference books and Sanskrit recensions after inviting me to Mussoorie in October 1980 to deliver a series of lectures on Indian culture; I have tried to put some of his material to good use.

I am grateful to James Laughlin for permission to quote extracts from my introduction in *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation*

(New Directions) and to Robert Antoine for extracts from *Religious Hinduism* (St Paul Publications).

Sri Bhagwati Prasad Sharma deserves special thanks for meeting impossible typing deadlines. If any religious merit resides in supplying a meticulous *Ramayana* typescript in record time, he has richly earned all of it.

Translating Vyasa and Valmiki is a humbling experience, and it is impossible to list the range and depth of one's gratitude to the tradition, to friends, and even to knowledgeable strangers, casual conversations or meetings with whom spark off new insights into the epics. These I thank unnamed, and I thank in advance all who are inspired, with sincere motives, to point out any weaknesses and inadequacies in this version and whose sympathetic criticism helps to improve my attempt to present Valmiki in readable English to interested Indians and others in the closing quarter of the twentieth century.

P.L.

Introduction

Lava and Kusha,
Twin sons of Sita,
Sang the *Ramayana*,
The story of Rama composed by Valmiki,
To the willing audience.
And the people sat and listened,
Enraptured they listened,
Their faces pearled with tears,
Like dew-dripping trees in a forest
On a windless morning.

KALIDASA: *The Dynasty of Raghu*
(*Raghuvamsha* XV: 63-64, 66)

1. THE EPIC OF COMPASSION

Valmiki is honoured in the Indian tradition as the *Adi-Kavi*, or the First Poet, and so in a sense the Ideal Poet; and the *Ramayana* is the *adi-kavya* or the First and Ideal Poem. It is also a *kavya-itihasa*, a “poem-history”, an epic that imaginatively chronicles actual events after making allowance for whatever blurring and ambiguity are inevitable over a considerable passage of time.

A *kavya* starts with a benediction and a prologue that summarises the story; it is in verse; the plot develops smoothly with appropriate “joining-points”; the hero is super-human or divine; the dominant *rasa* is erotic (as in the *Ramayana*) or heroic (the *Mahabharata*); it includes the performance of miraculous deeds and magical episodes; the hero and heroine overcome moral trials and emotional tribulations; “love triumphs, truth prevails, duty is done and the gods obeyed, and release obtained from the dread burden of *samsara* (transmigration)”; it describes the spectacle of life in its variety and complexity, and presents the beauty of nature as well; its style is dignified, inspiring, and pleasing.

All this information is easily enough obtainable from any respectable treatise on Sanskrit literature. The crucial question is: what is Valmiki trying to get across to his listeners and readers? Is the *Ramayana* a glorification of Rama as an avatara of Vishnu? Is it a record of imperialist expansion of the northern Aryan rulers of India into the inaccessible, Dravidian south? Is it an attempt to portray, as objectively as possible in Valmiki’s time, the confrontation of two cultures; of urban and forest life-styles and their conflict; of luxurious administration in Ayodhya and indulgence in Lanka opposed to the philosophy of renunciation and serenity in the forests of Dandakaranya and Chitrakuta? I will deal with this in more detail in the section headed “Controversies Around the *Ramayana*”, but it seems that elaborate argument on the question of the *Ramayana*’s central message will tend only to obfuscate the epic’s moral clarity on this point. The message is direct enough.

And it was left to Mahatma Gandhi to explain it in its beautiful simplicity. In the “Epilogue” to his version of the *Ramayana*, C. Rajagopalachari (whose daughter married Gandhiji’s son) recalls that on one occasion “Gandhiji and I were talking about a girl very dear to both of us.”

Rajaji asked the Mahatma, "How did she get all these ideas and phrases of love without having read any of the present-day love stories?"

And Gandhiji replied, "But has she not read the *Ramayana*? Is the *Ramayana* not a love story too?"

Commenting, "This struck me as profound," Rajaji adds quickly, "Then we turned to other matters."

Rajaji proceeds to explain how "Dasharatha's troubles began with love. . . . The love of Rama and Sita is the theme and substance of 'Ayodhya-Kanda'. In love that is not opposed to dharma, we find a manifestation of God The *Ramayana* has, for its twin theme, love that is opposed to dharma also."

Rajaji then remarks that "Sita, the female counterpart of the Supreme Being, is the embodiment of compassion and grace. Compassion is the Supreme Mother and she is enthroned in the heart of the Lord If the Lord were to be parted from compassion, our plight would be just that of Ravana who separated Sita from Rama. The quality of the Lord's compassion can be understood from the experience of true human love."

Shorn of its metaphysical involution, this view seems to me to get to the heart of Valmiki's *kavya*.

From *shoka* comes *shloka*—from compassionate grief comes poetry. It is this sweet-sad thread of lovingkind grief—what Sanskrit dramaturgy terms *karuna*—that I have carefully tried to retain in my abridgement, and with it sought to knot the main narrative, in the hope that my reader will pass through the same tear-pearling catharsis that Lava and Kusha's listeners experienced when Sita's twin sons sang their song of personal sorrow to the assembled audience, headed by their father, in Valmiki's ashram. Or so Kalidasa would have us believe (see the epigraph affixed to this introduction).

The quality of *karuna* in the *Ramayana* stirred the 8th-century Sanskrit dramatist Bhavabhuti so deeply that in his play *Uttara-Rama-charita* (*The Later Story of Rama*) he tried to condone the abandonment of Sita by re-uniting Sita with Rama in Act VII after having Rama pass through a purging upheaval of remorse. In doing so, he came very close to soap-opera lachrymosity. "The *karuna rasa*," I wrote in my preface to the play in *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (New Directions, 1964), "becomes, in places,

sentimentalised out of recognition. Where tenderness stops and sentimentality begins is always difficult to determine; for this reason *The Later Story of Rama* is a play only the subtlest Hindu can appreciate, for its frames of emotional reference are filtered through very fine cultural sieves and the situations manoeuvred with such dexterity that, to a reader on the right wave-length, they communicate unbelievably fine poignancies."

As an epic, the *Ramayana* transcends every attempt to reduce it into a convenient text to suit parochial interpretation; therefore, my emphasis on seeing it as a *katha* that evokes mostly the *karuna* rasa is offered only as a suggestive guideline. This much, however, seems reasonable though paradoxical: the *Mahabharata*, in spite of being throughout the autobiographical chronicle of Vyasa and his children and grandchildren, remains strangely impersonal, even chillingly distant and disturbing; the *Ramayana*, where Valmiki is closely involved only briefly once in the beginning when Rama and Sita visit his ashram and once at the end when he entrusts Lava and Kusha to the care of the ashram ladies, is always intensely personal, warm, and human. The *Mahabharata* is a document of near-despair, the *Ramayana* a gospel of gentle bhakti.

The quality of Valmiki's *karuna* is indeed special, if we are to judge by the effect the chanting of the exploits of Rama has on Shatrughna and his companions when they halt briefly at Valmiki's ashram and are invited to listen to the epic story after they have finished eating. Listening to the "truth" of the narrative, says Valmiki, the "human-lion" (*purusha-shardula*) Shatrughna "sighed deeply again and again" and "tears streamed down his eyes."

The other heroes—all veteran warriors—listened also, with "bowed heads", and kept repeating, humbly, "How wonderful!" They are "soldiers" (*sainikah*) but they are so moved that they turn to each other, dazed, eyes washed with the miracle of intense vicarious compassion, and whisper:

"kimidam ka cha vartamah kimetat svapnadarshanam"

"What is this? Where are we?
Is it a vision? Is it a dream?"

("Uttara-Kanda", 71: 20)

2. THE HARD-CORE NARRATIVE

Twentieth century scholars and readers are obsessively interested in attempting to reconstruct the "authentic" *Ramayana* of Valmiki by weeding out what they suspect to be later interpolations. No such semantic neurosis grips the popular reader of the epic; he is generally an oral-tradition listener rather than a print-culture reader, and is not affected by linguistic and textual "irritations". What his imagination sees and seizes as true, suffices. This is the case with all oral epics, and this is the reason why I have refrained from omitting from my condensed version many passages and episodes which very respectable pundits of the *Ramayana* treat as spurious. Philosophy can clip an angel's wings; and hard-headed academic investigation can not only lop off nine of the ten heads of Ravana but also ground for good—some would argue for bad—the aerial chariot Pushpaka as well.

Yet unremitting serious scholarship is very much with us and, even if not always revered, should not be ignored. A two-cheer tribute is in order.

Reverend C. Bulcke, an acknowledged authority whose *Rama-Katha* (1950) in Hindi is an indispensable contribution to *Ramayana* research, firmly believes that there are only "five genuine books of the Valmiki *Ramayana*." He considers the first and last books ("Bala-Kanda" and "Uttara-Kanda") to be entirely spurious.

Book One, in his view, is an interpolation because the first canto of the Bala-Kanda summarises the epic "without making a single reference to the subject-matter of the Bala-Kanda itself", though later a second table of contents is inserted in *sarga* 3; because there is a lack of "unity" in the "style and composition" of the Bala-Kanda and more than half of the Book contains mythological tales that "have no direct bearing on the Rama-story"; and because there are "a few contradictions between the Bala-Kanda and the following books", specially the marriage of Lakshmana and Urmila, which "is contradicted in the Aranya-Kanda where, in *sarga* 18, Lakshmana is said to be unmarried." (I have resolved this difficulty by suggesting, in my condensed version, that Lakshmana is not unmarried but happens to be at that time without his wife.)

Book Seven is rejected by Father Bulcke on three grounds: it seems from the conclusion of Book Six that the original *Ramayana*

ended there; the summary of the epic in the first canto of the Bala-Kanda makes no mention of "any event" related in the "last book"; "the narrative story is very disconnected", it "contains many *puranic* stories which have no direct bearing on the plot", and "some of the contents contradict those of previous books."

Keeping in mind that the Bala-Kanda and Uttara-Kanda are perhaps not composed by Valmiki, though they are very much an integral part of the oral tradition, the hard-core narrative of the epic can be cautiously reconstructed. (In the following summary, which is reproduced with slight editing from Father Bulcke's essay on the *Ramayana* in *Religious Hinduism*, published by St Paul Publications, Allahabad, in 1964, the later interpolations are enclosed within brackets.)

BOOK ONE: BALA KANDA. (1) *Introduction*: A conversation between Valmiki and Narada, where Narada eulogises Rama and gives a bird's-eye view of the events of Books II to VI; the creation of the *shloka* by Valmiki; Brahma orders Valmiki to compose the *Ramayana*; a table of contents of the *Ramayana*; two disciples of Valmiki sing the *Ramayana* in public places and before the court of Ayodhya. (2) *Dasharatha's Sacrifices*: First there is a description of Ayodhya and of the Horse Sacrifice; (then is given the *Putreshtiyajna*, i.e., sacrifice for obtaining a son, where clear reference is made to Vishnu's incarnation in Rama and his brothers). (3) *Rama's Birth and Youthful Exploits*: The birth of the four brothers is described, then how Vishvamitra arrives and goes away with Rama and Lakshmana. The encounter with Tataka, Maricha and Subahu is described. (4) *Puranic Stories*: Vishvamitra's family-history is given; the descent of the Ganga, the churning of the ocean, Ahalya's deliverance, and the long story of how Vishvamitra became a Brahmin are given.) (5) *Rama's Marriage*: First the story of the breaking of the bow at Mithila, followed by the marriage of Rama and his three brothers, (the encounter with Parashurama), and the arrival in Ayodhya.

BOOK TWO: AYODHYA-KANDA. Dasharatha, king of Ayodhya, had four sons. The eldest was Rama, son of Kaushalya. Lakshmana and Shatrughna were sons of Sumitra. Bharata was the son of his favourite queen, Kaikeyi, to whom he had given the privilege of

any two boons which he promised to grant. As he was growing old he decided to instal Rama as heir-apparent to the throne. Manthara, the maid-servant of Kaikeyi, wanted to prevent this because she hated Rama, so she persuaded her mistress to ask for the two boons Dasharatha had promised. The first boon would be the banishment of Rama to the forests for fourteen years and the second boon would be the installation of her own son Bharata as the heir-apparent. Dasharatha granted the two boons and Rama prepared to leave the city. Sita and Lakshmana both pleaded for permission to accompany him, and this permission was granted. So the exiles left the city in a southerly direction; after crossing the Ganga with the help of Guha they visited the ashram of Bharadvaja at Prayaga (Allahabad), crossed the Yamuna, and reached Chitrakuta where they built a hut. Soon after their departure Dasharatha died of grief. His sons Bharata and Shatrughna who had been absent from Ayodhya up to this time returned for the funeral rites. Bharata refused the throne and visited Rama in the forest. He pleaded with Rama to return and to rule, but Rama refused. After pleading in vain, Bharata returned to Ayodhya with Rama's sandals. These he placed on the throne as a symbol of Rama and he himself resided outside the city at Nandigrama, from where he attended to the government of the kingdom. Rama left Chitrakuta soon after Bharata's visit, (visited the ashram of Atri), and penetrated farther into the jungles towards the south.

BOOK THREE: ARANYA-KANDA. (During this journey the demon Viradha is slain, and the exiles visit the ashrams of Sarabhangha, Sutikshana, and Agastya; they also meet the vulture Jatayu). Eventually Rama and his companions arrived at Panchavati and built a hut there. After this Shurpanakha, Ravana's sister, was mutilated by Lakshmana and the armies of the demons Khara and Dushana were defeated. Shurpanakha reported all this to Ravana and incited him to kidnap Sita. (At the request of Ravana the demon Maricha transformed himself into a golden deer and enticed Rama and Lakshmana away from the hut.) In their absence Ravana kidnapped Sita. The vulture Jatayu attacked Ravana but was mortally wounded. Sita was placed in the Ashoka-vana, the garden of Lanka. When Rama and Lakshmana returned to find their hut empty and Sita missing, they immediately began their search for Sita. On their

way they met the dying vulture Jatayu, killed the monster Kabandha, and visited Shabari in her ashram.

BOOK FOUR: KISHKINDHA-KANDA. Sugriva was exiled to the forest by his brother Vali. He sent Hanuman to Rama and Lakshmana and, after a test of Rama's strength had been made, made an alliance with Rama. While Vali was engaged in a duel with Sugriva, Rama shot him with an arrow and killed him. The throne of Kishkindha was restored to Sugriva. After the rainy season Sugriva sent Hanuman with some companions to the south to search for Sita. At first they found no trace of her and were on the point of despairing when they met Sampati, the brother of Jatayu. Sampati told them that his son Shuparshva had seen a dark-coloured man carrying a woman across the hill, travelling on foot. *(It is worthy of note that this passage shows that originally there was no question of an aerial chariot in which Ravana took Sita to Lanka; also the location of Lanka is somewhere in central India and certainly not in Sri Lanka, the latter location being due to later Buddhist literature.)* Sampati also told Rama and Lakshmana that the man was Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, the city that lies across the waters at which they had now arrived.

BOOK FIVE: SUNDARA-KANDA. After a phenomenal leap (later described as crossing the sea) Hanuman arrived at Lanka and found Sita in the Ashoka-vana surrounded by guards. He witnessed Ravana's visit to Sita and Ravana's futile attempt to win her favour. Hanuman revealed himself to Sita when she had been left alone, assured her of a speedy deliverance, and hurried home to his companions. (Hanuman destroyed the garden, killed some demons, and was captured by Indrajit, one of Ravana's sons. At the intercession of Vibhishana, a brother of Ravana, Hanuman was punished instead of being killed, and they set fire to the oil-saturated clothes which they had wound onto his tail. Hanuman freed himself and, jumping from roof to roof, set fire to the city of Lanka.) Finally Hanuman and his companions returned to Rama with the news that Sita had been found a captive at Lanka.

BOOK SIX: YUDDHA-KANDA. The monkey-host began its march on Lanka and so reached the edge of the waters. Meanwhile Ravana held council. When he rejected Vibhishana's proposal to avoid war by

returning Sita, Vibhishana took refuge with Rama. A bridge was built across the waters and Lanka was invaded. (Some of Ravana's spies who had been caught were sent back to Ravana. A Maya-shirsha, artificial head of Rama, was shown to Sita, but Vibhishana's daughter revealed the fraud to her.) Rama sent Angada, Sugriva's son, as ambassador to Ravana, who obstinately refused to return Sita. A long series of battles and duels followed. The chief events were : Indrajit wounded Rama and Lakshmana who lay unconscious on the battlefield bound by snake-arrows. (They were freed by Garuda.) Then Kumbhakarna, a brother of Ravana, who slept for six months and remained awake for one day, was awakened; he entered the battlefield, won a great victory, but eventually was killed by Rama. Indrajit wounded many, including Rama and Lakshmana. (Hanuman was sent to the Himalayas to fetch certain herbs and, when unable to find them, he brought the whole summit of the mountain to Lanka, returning it later. The herbs cured all the wounded.) Lanka was set on fire at night-time by the monkeys. Indrajit again entered the battlefield and decapitated an illusory Sita in order to discourage Rama, but Vibhishana revealed the fraud. Then he withdrew to Nikumbhila to perform a sacrifice that would make him invincible, but he was prevented from performing it by the monkeys, and killed by Lakshmana. Ravana wounded Lakshmana with the spear called Shakti. (Hanuman again fetched the mountain with the herbs from the Himalayas.) The battle ended with a duel between Rama and Ravana, in which Ravana was killed. Vibhishana was crowned king in his place. (Rama called Sita into his presence and addressed hard words to her, intending to abandon her. Sita protested her innocence and asked Lakshmana to prepare a fire. She fearlessly entered the fire and was restored to Rama by the god Agni.) Rama accepted Sita and began the return journey (in the Pushpaka, aerial chariot of Ravana). Rama was crowned king of Ayodhya (where he reigned for ten thousand years and had thousands of sons). His reign, the proverbial Rama-rajya, is described in glowing terms : there was no sickness, no sorrow, no fear of wild animals or of thieves, no drought, no infant mortality. All were pious, truthful, and devoted to the practice of good works.

BOOK SEVEN: UTTARA-KANDA. (1) (The story of Ravana is related in thirty-four cantos and that of Hanuman in two cantos.) (2) The narrative of the Yuddha-Kanda is taken up, beginning from the day after

Rama's coronation. (3) The repudiation of Sita is related in eleven cantos. The people blame Rama for taking Sita back into his house after she has been so long in Ravana's house. Accordingly Lakshmana is ordered to abandon her in the forest; he does so, leaving her in the vicinity of Valmiki's ashram, and here she receives shelter. (4) (Rama tells Lakshmana the *puranic* stories of Nriga, Nimi, and Yayati.) (5) Shatrughna is sent to kill the demon Lavana. On his way he spends the night at Valmiki's ashram, his visit coinciding with Sita's delivery of twins, both boys. He proceeds on his way, kills Lavana, and founds the city of Madhupura. Twelve years later he returns to Ayodhya, stops again at Valmiki's ashram, and there he hears the twins recite the *Ramayana*. (6) (A Brahmin's son dies at a young age; Narada reveals the cause of this death; a low-caste Shudra. Shambuka by name, was practising asceticism contrary to caste rules, so Rama goes and kills him.) (7) Then Rama's Horse Sacrifice is related. Valmiki and the twins Kusha and Lava attend this, and the boys sing the *Ramayana* before the assembly. When Rama learns that they are the sons of Sita, he tells Valmiki to fetch Sita so that she might take a solemn oath before all the people and be purified. Sita comes and takes the famous oath: "Swallow me up, earth goddess, if I have never thought of any but Rama; swallow me up, earth goddess, if I have worshipped Rama in thought, word, and deed; swallow me up, earth goddess, if it is true that I have known none but Rama." The earth opens and receives Sita. On the following day, the boys sing the last part of the Uttara-Kanda. (8) Then the conquests of the sons of Lakshmana and Bharata are narrated. Lakshmana's tragic death is followed by the description of Kusha's settling at Kushvati and Lava's settling at Sravasti. Finally, Rama, Bharata, Shatrughna and the citizens of Ayodhya leave the city and go in procession to the river Sarayu. There Rama and his brothers enter bodily into the Vishnu form. The citizens abandon their bodies to the river and acquire heaven.

3. CONTROVERSIES AROUND THE RAMAYANA

There are hardly any disputes over the *Ramacharitamanasa*, the Hindi re-telling of the *Ramayana* by Tulsidas (1532-1623): it is a straight bhakti celebration of Rama as a personal God, and its clear stress is on sacrifice of self and uncomplaining service of others as

exemplified in the lives of its main characters. This is not so with Valmiki's composition; problems, ambiguities, contradictions and controversies cluster around the Adi-kavi's handling of the story and its characters, and there are fierce unresolved, and apparently unresolvable, academic bickerings over points related to its composition, geography, and theology.

There are four major areas of scholarly debate.

(1) *Date of composition.* No one really knows, but one could hazard a guess anywhere between 1500 B.C. to 200 B.C. A Press Trust of India report, carried by the Bengali daily *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 24 December 1980, said: "When was the *Ramayana* composed? If the research done by an Ahmedabad scholar of geology can be relied upon, the *Ramayana* cannot be more than 2,800 years old. The city of Shringaverapura, mentioned in the *Ramayana* and situated between Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab, was excavated recently and a dating of its radio-carbon has helped scholars to arrive at this conclusion. They have presented their opinion in a report submitted to the Archaeological Survey of India. Their spokesman expressed the view that if the specimens gathered from the ruins were genuine and had remained intact through the ages, it was clear that the *Ramayana* could not have been written before 800 B.C."

A great deal of archaeological activity has been going on in India in the last decade; most of it has been on an organised basis, some sporadic and spurred by obsessive personal dedication. Among the recent excavations, the focus has been on Ayodhya. In his presidential address to the eighth annual conference of the Indian Archaeological Society (not to be confused with the Archaeological Survey of India, a totally government body), Professor B. B. Lal declared that he had in mind "a thorough exploration of all sites connected with the *Ramayana* story and excavation of as many of them as possible." This five-year project, assisted by the Archaeological Survey of India, the University Grants Commission, and the Government of Uttar Pradesh, had plans ready to start excavation at Nandigram, associated with Bharata, and at Lakhman Tila (Lucknow), associated with Lakshmana. For the sake of those who might start feeling uneasy at the possibility of Rama being later than Krishna, Professor Lal offered to dig "in their presence" the Krishna Janma-Bhumi area at Mathura and the Rama Janma-

Bhumi area at Ayodhya so that they might see for themselves the results. "Let the spade speak, not me," he added.

How the spade speaks depends on who is digging, where, how deep, and, most important of all, whether the birth places connected with Rama and Krishna are historical or inextricably mixed with and clouded by legendary associations. Professor Lal said it was well known and accepted by most Sanskrit scholars that in their available forms the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were unlikely to be earlier than the 4th century A.D. On the other hand, if Rama and Krishna were really historical figures they must have lived earlier than the time of the Buddha which is the 6th century B.C. There is a clear gap of more than a thousand years between the episodes mentioned in the two epics and the finalisation of their texts. "In such an event, how could one wholly rely on them?" The best course, in his opinion, is to look at the direct evidence provided by the sites associated with the two epics—which, of course, is not as easy as it sounds.

Easy or not, the "*Ramayana* Excavations" are going on in full swing, and Professor B. B. Lal is so impressed by the archaeological evidence that he can say categorically that "the *Ramayana* is not a figment of imagination," if a press release issued on 9 February 1981 is to be believed. "The present exploration in Chitrakuta in Uttar Pradesh," according to the report, "have yielded the same kind of material as has been found at the other *Ramayana* sites like Ayodhya (the capital of Dasharatha's kingdom), Shringaverapura (where Shri Rama crossed the Ganga on his southward journey during his 14-year exile), and Bharadvaja Ashram (near Anand Bhavan, the ancestral house of the Nehru family at Allahabad) where Rama stayed for a while with sage Bharadvaja. Chitrakuta is situated on the bank of the Mandakini in the Banda district of U.P. where a number of temples are found on its left bank. The hallmark of the *Ramayana* period is a very characteristic pottery called by the archaeologists as the northern black polished ware. It is shining and gives mirror-like reflections when held against the light. It is found in a variety of shades, ranging from steel-black to golden. In between the temples of Chitrakuta are some un-built areas. It is from these exposures that the earliest variety of the shining black pottery has been collected for the past four years. Further work at the site will be resumed during the coming months."

Addressing the four-day seminar of the Madhya Pradesh Directorate of Archaeology on 23 February 1978, on the historicity of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Dr. A. K. Chatterjee was convinced that the “original *Ramayana* was completed much before the *Mahabharata* and that both epics were completed before the rise of the Pataliputra-Ujjaini cultural complex.” According to him, the entire *Ramayana*, excepting the “Uttara-Kanda”, was composed by a single poet “before the birth of Lord Mahavira and Lord Buddha”; the “Uttara-Kanda” was composed after a few centuries, but completed before the birth of Christ. He said Rama, Dasharatha and Ashvapati (one of Dasharatha’s fathers-in-law) lived about 2050 B.C.—on the basis of literary evidence, particularly the famous verse in the *Puranas* that spoke of a time-gap of 1050 years between Parikshit II and Mahapadma Nanda, and other portions of the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* referring to thirty generations between Rama and Brihadbala who was killed in the Kurukshetra war.

Dr. Chatterjee added, however, that “since several places had been named after those mentioned in the *Ramayana* because of the popularity of the great epic, historians and archaeologists would have to be more careful in conducting their studies.”

Which brings us back to square one: no one can be completely sure about what sites are historically named and continuous, and what sites are named later for pious, sentimental or other reasons; and until one is certain, excavations will continue to be splendid large-scale earth-moving exercises that provide fertile material of purely academic interest to sincerely motivated but sidetracking scholars at seminars and conferences.

Dating the composition of the epic is further complicated by the fact that the actual texts that we possess in different recensions are variously impure; even the carefully collated Poona Bhandarkar text is not above criticism (Professor H.D. Sankalia, in his book *Ramayana—Myth or Reality?* argues persuasively that “evidence has been adduced, both in English translation as well as in Sanskrit, to prove that even the Critical Edition [of Poona and Baroda] . . . contains much that is pure fancy or fiction.”)

In fact, there have been suggestions that the *Ramayana* was influenced by a variety of foreign sources. None of this is provable but scholars speculate that Greek influences played a part in suggesting

the abduction of Sita. Lassen saw the *Ramayana* as a historical chronicle of the Aryanisation of South India; Weber found parallels between the Trojan war and the war in Lanka, and even suggested that Valmiki borrowed from a Buddhist story in the "Dasharatha Jataka" where Rama and Sita are brother and sister (see further discussion on this in sub-section 3 titled "Is Rama an avatara of Vishnu?").

There seems to be tenuous agreement on the theory that the oral *Ramayana* story was current from 800 B.C. onwards and sometime during the 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. it was written down and "given a Brahminical tone throughout which was not characteristic of the original work". Even this is a hazardous consensus.

(2) *Where is Lanka?* On the map, it is obviously Sri Lanka or the pear-shaped island of Ceylon at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula. The popular Indian imagination refuses to entertain any other possibility. Yet an influential Marxist group of scholars, perturbed by the fanciful exploits of Hanuman and certain discrepancies in Valmiki's descriptions of the landscape and scenery, feel that Lanka was located somewhere in central India and that Hanuman did not cross any sea or build any bridge across the strait; there was apparently only a shallow lake serving as a moat to Lanka and the agile aborigines, led by Hanuman, manoeuvred a hop-skip-and-jump through it.

The clearest and, to those interested in demythification and rationalisation of the *Ramayana*, most reasonable and acceptable presentation of this theory is in Professor H. D. Sankalia's book *Ramayana—Myth or Reality?* (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973). His conclusions are simple. He argues that "Ravana was a dark-skinned man" who belonged "very probably to the Gond tribe"; the "Lanka of this Ravana was in the Chota Nagpur plateau in east M.P. and most probably near Jabalpur"; Rama and Lakshmana and the Gonds "fought with bows, arrows and swords, and spears, whereas the Vanaras who were other aboriginal tribes fought with missiles like trees and stones"; "all the places occurring in the Dandakaranya can be satisfactorily identified in this region, south of Prayag." Professor Sankalia buttresses his views with an elaborate network of references and quotations. The only problem is that in an oral-culture tradition, the brainy techniques of print-culture pundits invariably fail to make any noticeable dent—and, as far as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are concerned, India is still very decidedly oral-culture in its preference.

(3) *Is Rama an avatara of Vishnu?* If so, why does he order the nose-mutilation of Shurpanakha? Why does he, as some critics point out, shabbily kill Vali? Why does he pass Sita through the humiliating fire-test?

In a note on the Shurpanakha episode in his version of the *Ramayana*, C. Rajagopalachari expressed misgivings over the attitude of "some people who pose as critics of our holy books and traditions." These fault-finders apparently say that Rama "killed a woman (Tataka). He insulted and injured a woman who offered him her love. He killed Vali from behind, rather than face him and accept honourable defeat. He unjustly banished Sita to the forest at the end of all the adventures. If the banishment of Sita was not unjust and if he rightly suspected Sita's fidelity, why then, we too must suspect her fidelity."

Rajagopalachari consoled himself by arguing that all such criticism is "based on a mentality of hatred. We have unfortunately plenty of barren, heartless cleverness, devoid of understanding. Let those who find faults in Rama see faults, and if these critics faultlessly pursue dharma and avoid in their own lives the flaws they discover in Rama, the *bhaktas* of Sri Rama will indeed welcome it with joy. If they exhibit the virtues of Rama and add to these more virtues and greater flawlessness, who can complain?"

None, because no one without sin should be casting the first stone anyway. But surely the point at issue here is why an avatara of Vishnu should behave as very much less than an avatara. Is it that an avatara loses divinity once he assumes human form? Is there a deeper significance, shrouded in impenetrable theological secrecy, in his actions that mortals cannot grasp, because God works in mysterious ways? The question is very valid, and to dismiss those who raise it as people blinded by hate or people covering up their own weaknesses by pointing at others' sins is to betray a needless moral complacency amounting to arrogance.

The strange behaviour of Rama puzzled no less a grey eminence than Sri Aurobindo and in an interview given to a disciple (A.B. Purani : *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo* (2nd series), Pondicherry, 1961) he formulated his doubts in unambiguous words. To the question, "Did Rama live, or is he merely the creation of Valmiki?" he replied, "There is no ground to believe that Rama is a historical figure," though he qualified this later by adding, "Rama might have

lived but one cannot say anything definite."

When the disciple persisted by asking, "But the account of the conquest and other things?", Sri Aurobindo answered, "Do you believe a king marches to Lanka with an army of monkeys? Valmiki may have taken it from tradition, or from imagination, and created figures which so well suited the Indian temperament that the whole race took them into its consciousness, and assimilated them. Some even believe that there were *Ramayanas* before Valmiki's and that even in the Veda you find Rama symbolising the divine and Sita standing for the earth. It may also be that Valmiki brought it over from some Daivic plane to this earth."

The debate over Rama's divinity was given extra sharpness, sometimes leading to all the acrid acrimony of an academic slanging match, in 1977 when the late Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, then National Professor, addressing a meeting sponsored by the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, stunned the community of Indological scholars by stating in his characteristically no-nonsense way that the "*Ramayana* was a fiction and not a historical account of any particular age." The respected status of Dr. Chatterji, an octogenarian savant, compelled awed attention even from fanatic supporters of Rama's avatara-hood. According to a newspaper report, he "disputed the belief that Rama was an avatara of Lord Vishnu. He said the concept of Lord Vishnu had not developed to any great extent at the time of Valmiki and added that the character of Rama had attained its divineness at a later period. The *Ramayana*, according to him, had originally been written around 500 B.C. and the present form took shape by about 2nd century A.D."

Equally startling was Dr. Chatterji's second contention—that Valmiki had borrowed the *Ramayana* story from the "Dasharatha Jataka" of Buddhist literature. In the Buddhist tale, Sita was the younger sister of Rama, who later married her. The story runs like this: "The father of Rama was a king of Varanasi (not Ayodhya) and had two wives, Kaushalya and Kaikeyi. To please the latter, he banished his eldest son to the Himalayas (not towards the Vindhya Hills in the South). Sita, his sister, and Lakshmana followed Rama to his exile. Rama returned to Varanasi after the death of his father and ruled for several years, along with his wife Sita, before he died a natural death. Rama was described in the 'Jataka' not as a warrior but as a pundit and one who was not given to grief."

According to Dr. Chatterji, Valmiki simply shifted the scene from Varanasi to Ayodhya and sent Rama in exile to the Vindhya Hills. As for the abduction of Sita, it was in his opinion influenced by Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. "Valmiki perhaps did not change the original relation between Rama and Sita; that might have come at a later stage when society did not permit marriages between brothers and sisters. Stressing his point, the National Professor argued that even today such marriages took place in the Himalayan region, essentially to keep property intact. The practice, according to him, was common in ancient India."

In the spate of letters to the editor that followed in the pages of the Calcutta daily that carried a report of Dr. Chatterji's talk, the majority expressed disbelief, displeasure, hostility, and bemused tolerance of the eccentricities of a scholar carried away by excessive secular zeal. "It was strange," wrote one correspondent, "to hear Professor Chatterji basing his findings on the work of a Belgian missionary (Rev. C. Bulcke's Hindi *Rama-katha*), thereby hurting the feelings of millions who worship Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu." Another correspondent wrote, "I am sure that the common man has remained unaffected by the controversy. One wonders what led the Professor to question the faith of millions in this country." The general reaction was that it had been an "unhealthy controversy", and the last letter summed it up by saying, "A historian can investigate about Rama the historical figure but not about Rama the avatara of Vishnu. And Professor Chatterji's view is only another conjecture. The devout need not, therefore, go into a frenzy. As far as I am concerned, when saints such as Tulsidas, Samarth Ramdas Bhadrachal Ramdas and Thyagaraja say they have 'seen' Rama, I believe them."

Again, back to square one: only those who have eyes, will see; physical and mental vision is one thing, spiritual and mystic vision another.

How, then, does one "explain" the un-avatara-like behaviour of Rama towards Tataka, Shurpanakha, and Vali? The believing don't need an explanation; the disbelieving are always up to specialised mischief, anyway. It's best to leave the faithful to their *bhajans*, and the sceptical to their critical editions.

When all is said and done, however, one ghost refuses to rest, especially in our half-century, in the age of Women's Lib. Rama's

treatment of Sita has bewildered and disturbed even the devoutest of the devout, and it is ridiculous to close one's eyes to it. This has to be faced squarely; it needs to be discussed; it calls for explanation, justification, apologia, whatever. The *Ramayana* (*The Wanderings of Rama*) could just as easily have been titled the *Sitayana* (*The Sorrows of Sita*).

An Indian lady whose culture and practical wisdom I admire, and whose bhakti for the divinity of Rama I respect, confessed to me once that she could understand and "excuse" all that Rama did to Sita—even the public fire-ordeal through which he made her pass—but what she could never justify was the way in which he repudiated and banished her to the forest during her pregnancy. "Not one word from him! Surely it couldn't be that he thought Sita would refuse. As a good Hindu wife, the ideal *sa-dharma-charini*, surely she would have understood and agreed to anything he wished. Yet he ordered Lakshmana to abandon her, helpless, in the wilderness, though he knew she was pregnant. How can anyone's heart become so hardened?" (Ironically, it is Valmiki himself, composer of the *Ramayana*, the epic of compassion, who opens his heart to the lost, frail Sita and instructs his disciples to give her shelter in the ashram. What must Valmiki have thought of the *karuna*-less behaviour of the hero of his great poem?)

This is where the ladies enter the lists. Their concern is not with black mirror-sparkling pottery of the eighth century B.C. or vague borrowings from Buddhist stories or intense theological wranglings over how avatars are humanised and humans divinified. They are concerned about the loss of feminine dignity; they fear that exculpation of misdemeanour in this field will permit further humiliation and exploitation of women in Indian society and other societies similar to ours. Because a Hindu husband is a god, a *pati-devata*, to his wife does not prevent him from having clay feet. Because clay feet are touched and respected does not mean that they are thereby sanctified and deified. Honour, like love, cannot be bestowed; it is deserved.

The editor of *Eve's Weekly*, a women's magazine published from Bombay, decided to print in its Divali 1978 issue an article by Jyoti Punwani titled "The *Ramayana* Revisited" in which Shrimati Punwani regretted the manner in which Rama behaves towards Shurpanakha, and specifically criticised his cavalier, almost male

chauvinist, attitude towards Sita in subjecting her to the fire-test.

That was the only spark needed to ignite a flaming reaction of roused readers' letters protesting vehemently against the "maligining" of Rama's character by a lady who had clearly stepped out of the magic circle of domestic docility and started treading on too many male toes. Here's a sampling of the mixture of sense, rationalisation and illogic in some of the arguments used by the correspondents (whom I shall discreetly leave unnamed) in order to justify Rama's conduct:

(a) "Rama's *tyaga* of Sita This is done only for the sake of his subjects and not for personal pleasure. It was considered to be the king's duty to place before the public the highest standards of morality and conduct and set the best example even if some sacrifice was necessary. It is Rama's greatness that he can abdicate the thing he loves most for the sake of a common man. In the process, it is Sita who suffers most and so she deserves great respect. That is why the name of Sita precedes the name of Rama everywhere in Hindu literature. If Rama is considered God, Sita is also worshipped."

(b) "Rama's conduct with Sita is not wrong. Rama knows that Sita is pure but he has to prove this to others too. If Rama were not to ask Sita to prove her purity, the author may have said that Rama is a lustful man who, without asking for proof, gladly accepts his wife who has stayed in another man's house for a year."

(c) "The reason for subjecting Sita to the baptism by fire is to demonstrate to all posterity the purity of Sita's character. Her exile later is to demonstrate to the whole world the highest ideal of kingship. Is there any other example of such renunciation of a beloved queen by a king, in deference to public opinion? Rama's devotion to his wife is evidenced by his refusal to marry again"

(d) "When one considers Rama's suspicions regarding Sita's chastity, one must remember this—that morality in those times was not merely in deed, but even in word and thought Proof had to be by acid test rather than mere word of mouth. Even today certain tribes use fire-walking as a proof of innocence"

(4) *Why does Rama kill Shambuka?* I will let the reader decide this for himself—the brief episode is transcreated in its entirety in the last book, the "Uttara-Kanda". It is not a pleasant episode—

and no one has offered an acceptable rational interpretation yet.

4. TRANSLATING THE RAMAYANA

I have followed the same principles for transcreating the *Ramayana* as I adopted for my condensed rendering of the *Mahabharata*. First, I have kept the spirit of the contemporary age very much in mind, because I strongly believe that a translator speaks only to his contemporaries, unlike the creative writer who may speak to succeeding ages as well; every text of high imagination deserves to be freshly translated for every generation. The reader I have in mind is the English-educated Indian who, for one reason or other, has lost touch with the roots of his tradition and wishes to re-establish contact with his culture with the help of English; any others who are interested I classify as friendly eavesdroppers; they are welcome to enjoy the show but the performance was not really intended for their pleasure.

Secondly, I have stressed the dramatic elements in Valmiki's narrative, specially those episodes that bring out subtleties of character. I have not ventured into the epic with any bias—historical, literary, or religious—but I have certainly stressed its psychological aspects, and tried to communicate the exquisite quality of pathos that Sanskrit rhetoricians call the *karuna rasa* and which appears to me to be the essence of the *Ramayana*.

Thirdly, I have treated the epic as an oral-culture experience, and tried to use an idiom that has a *spoken*, immediate impact. I am antipathetic to all versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that treat them as elaborate print-culture texts and try to convey their literary flavour by resorting to archaisms, prolixities, and complicated tropes of all kinds.

Finally, I have tried to retain the “epiphany-points” of the epic. “These are passages, usually not over-long, that are embedded in every major epic of the world, where the narrative seems to miraculously lift into a sudden experience of the unsaid and almost unsayable mystery of human relationship, or where it bursts into an ecstatic celebration of some spiritual discovery, or where it describes with memorable lyricism some unsuspected exquisiteness of the beauty of nature.” The *Ramayana* is filled with examples of the

last, which is why I have allowed three-fourths of my transcreation to flow as free verse. It is not as free as it looks, because I have consciously attempted to fashion a verse-form that will capture the disciplined lyricism of Valmiki's poetic passages.

This is not the place to launch into a panegyric on the lyrical loveliness and memorability of much of the best of Valmiki, but any sensitive reader will immediately be struck by the endless number of ethically inspiring and poetically evocative shlokas in the *Ramayana*, such as the following:

धर्मद्वयः प्रभवति धर्मात् प्रभवते सुखम् ।
धर्मेण लभते सर्वं धर्मसारमिदं जगत् ॥

*dharmādarthaḥ prabhavati dharmāt prabhavate sukhaṁ
dharmaṇa labhate sarvaṁ dharmasāramidaṁ jagat*

From Dharma comes success,
From Dharma comes happiness,
Dharma brings everything,
Dharma is the world's essence.

(Sita to Rama: Book 3)

प्रध्यायत् इवापश्यत् प्रदीपांस्तत्र काञ्चनान् ।
धूर्तानिव महाधूर्तैर्देवनेन पराजितान् ॥

*pradhyāyat ivāpaśyat pradīpāṁstatra kāñcanan
dhūrtaniva mahādhūrtairdevanena parājitān*

He gazed in awe at the golden lamps that flamed with the intensity of defeated gamblers plunged in concentrated thought.

(Hanuman in Ravana's palace: Book 5)

निःशब्दहंसभ्रमरं यथा पदमवनं महत् ।

niḥśabdahaṁsabhramaraṁ yathā padmavanam mahat

Like a lotus-forested lake
 Serene with silent swans
 And sleeping bees.

(Court ladies sleeping in the palace: Book 5)

कुसुमिततरु जालसंततानि भ्रमरयुतानि समुद्रतीरजानि ।
 कनकविमलहारभूषिताङ्गी विहर सह भीरु कानननि ॥

kusumitatarujālsaṁtatāni bhramarayutāni samudratīrajāni
kanakavimalaharabhūṣitāṅgi vihara saha bhīru kānanani

Wear gold necklaces,
 And roam with me
 On the shores of the sea
 Where black bees hum
 In the flowering trees.

(Ravana to Sita: Book 5)

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Prologue

*Once, not far from the river Tamasa,
The ascetic Valmiki was wandering in a forest,
Meditating on the beauty of nature.
Nearby, unafraid,
Two sweet-voiced krauncha birds were mating,
Savouring the delights of spontaneous love.
An ill-minded fowler of the Nishada tribe,
With deliberate malice,
In Valmiki's presence,
Killed the male bird.
Pierced by an arrow in the act of love,
The pink-tufted crane, wings outspread,
Toppled.
Wrenched from under her lover,
The female, seeing blood gush out,
Screamed.
She screamed piteously.
Compassion stirred in Valmiki's heart
When he saw the bird die.
More compassion stirred in him
When he heard the screams of the female.
Horrified by the act of adharma,
He cursed the fowler:*

*“Fowler! Listen to my words.
May peace of mind never be yours,
For you have killed this innocent bird
In his act of innocent love.”*

*Even as the words issued from his mouth,
He felt uneasy, and he thought:
What is this that I have said
In the intensity of my grief?
For some time
Wise Valmiki brooded;
Then, turning to his disciple Bharadvaja,
He said:*

*"Four lines of eight syllables each!
 From my sorrow came this song.
 From shoka comes shloka:
 There is no poetry without compassion."*

*Instantly, joyfully,
 Bharadvaja memorised the shloka.
 Valmiki was pleased.
 Having bathed in the sacred river,
 Valmiki returned to his ashram.
 Carrying a lota of water,
 Bharadvaja followed his guru.
 Wise-in-dharma Valmiki discussed various topics
 With his disciple,
 After which he relapsed into meditation.*

*It was then
 That Brahma, four-faced Creator of the worlds,
 Radiant, Self-Born Divinity,
 Appeared before Valmiki.
 Surprised and speechless,
 Valmiki rose quickly, and humbly
 Stood there, with palms joined in anjali.
 He offered puja
 And provided water to wash hands and feet;
 He brought a seat for the Lord.
 Bhagavan Brahma made himself comfortable,
 And motioned Rishi Valmiki to sit down.
 Valmiki obeyed, absent-mindedly.
 Though the Creator of the worlds was facing him,
 Valmiki slipped into a reverie,
 His mind focused on the fowler's crime.
 It was a cruel deed, he was thinking,
 A wicked deed to kill a sweet-voiced crane
 In his innocent love-making.
 He recalled the grief of the female
 And, repeating the shloka in front of Brahma,
 He pondered its meaning,
 And the poignance was too much,*

And once again sorrow overcame him.

Brahma smiled and said to Valmiki:

“May this shloka bring you glory!

There is no need to brood, O great Rishi.

The poetry that flowed from your lips

Was inspired by me.

The time is now ripe for you

To narrate to the world

The story of Rama, excelling Lord of dharma.

Narrate the known and the unknown deeds

of wise Rama

of Sumitra’s son Lakshmana

of Sita

and of the rakshasas.

You will be inspired, great Rishi!

The unknown will be opened to you,

All will be revealed to you.

Nothing you say in your poem will be untrue.

Sing then the sacred song

Of the enchanting exploits of Rama.

So long as the mountains and rivers of this earth

stay on the face of the earth,

So long will the story of Rama endure,

so long will your fame remain

In the realms of heaven above

and the kingdoms of earth below.”

BOOK ONE

Bala-Kanda

CHILDHOOD

Around the banks of the river Śarayu was the kingdom of Kosala, a prosperous land filled with happy people. Its capital was Ayodhya, a world-honoured city, founded by illustrious Manu, one of the primeval lords of mankind.

A splendid city, with massive gates and well-stocked markets, excellently fortified and guarded. Bards, folk singers, professional musicians. . .glittering mansions of the wealthy. . .exquisite gardens and mango groves. . .stately trees encircling its outskirts, breathtakingly beautiful. . .elephants, horses, camels. . .lovely, bejewelled ladies moving in groups on its chessboard-patterned streets. . .everywhere the harmonious sound of trumpets, kettledrums, *vinas*, and temple bells. . .a city of surpassing splendour.

The ruler of Ayodhya was King Dasharatha, who was wise in the Vedas and devoted to dharma. A farsighted monarch, loved by his subjects, a powerful chariot-hero, self-disciplined, truth-cherishing.

The citizens of Ayodhya were intelligent, contented, prosperous (all were well-to-do, possessing grain, cattle, horses), and followers of dharma. None swindled, none was stingy, none mean, none arrogant, none an atheist. The ladies wore gold necklaces and earrings, and used sandalpaste and scent on their bodies. Heroic and experienced warriors patrolled the city, like lions guarding mountain caves.

The ministers of this mahatma ruler were exceptionally qualified: unswervingly loyal, they were shrewd psychologists, and placed each problem in its proper perspective. There were eight of them: Dhrishti, Jayanta, Vijaya, Surashtra, Rashtravardhana, Akopa, Dharmapala, Arthavit, and Sumantra. They governed affectionately and tactfully. Assisted by his ministers, the king refrained from the ten vices born of lust—hunting, gambling, sleeping during the day, slandering, womanising, drunkenness, singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and idling—and the eight vices born of anger—backbiting, rashness, malice, jealousy, probing into others' faults, unjustly appropriating others' wealth, swearing, and using bitter words. Surrounded by able and devoted counsellors who were skilled in the administration of law and the application of justice, Dasharatha shone with the refulgence of a fully risen sun.

This mahatma ruler, so wise in the ways of dharma, so generous and just, had no son. And this was a cause of great sorrow to him.

It came to his mind one day: *Why don't I perform a Horse Sacrifice to obtain a son?*

He ordered his chief minister Sumantra to summon gurus, family priests, and other Brahmins, including Kashyapa and Vasishtha, and he spoke to them these words filled with dharma and purpose: "All these years I have longed for a son. I have longed in vain, and I cannot even pretend happiness any more. So I have decided to perform the Horse Sacrifice exactly as ordained in the *shastras*. How should I go about it? Let me know."

Vasishtha and the other Brahmins were unanimous in their approval. "An excellent plan. First, sire, the site of sacrifice should be selected on the northern bank of the Sarayu."

Dasharatha's charioteer and chief counsellor, Sumantra, said to the king in private: "Sire, there is a popular legend that I have heard; it is my duty to narrate it to you. It concerns your family and the future of your line. The holy sage Sanatkumara was the first to tell it to an assembly of ascetics. He predicted that Kashyapa would have a son named Vibhandaka; and Vibhandaka a son named Rishyashringa. Rishyashringa will be isolated from contact with humans, and brought up alone in a forest by his father. He will observe the twofold vow of *brahmacharya*, obey the words of his noble father, and dutifully perform all rituals before the sacred fire. And so time will pass. . .

"It will so happen that as a result of the immoral behaviour of Romapada of Anga, a terrible famine will ravage the kingdom. At the height of the drought, the suffering king will summon his learned Brahmins and say to them, 'You know what I have done. You know the ways of the world. Help me to expiate. Show me the approved way.'

"The Brahmins, wise in the Vedas, will then advise him, 'Sire, see that Vibhandaka's son Rishyashringa is brought here. Honour him, and offer him your daughter Shanta in marriage.' (Shanta was actually the daughter of King Dasharatha. Because the childless King Romapada requested this, Dasharatha gave him his daughter; this was the adopted girl whose marriage to Rishyashringa now began exercising the minds of Romapada's ministers.)

"They said to him: 'Sire, we have worked out a plan to bring Rishyashringa here. He lives in the forest; he knows nothing of the pleasures of the senses; he has never seen a girl in his life. He will

be seduced with sensuous delights, for which we will need the services of the most ravishing courtesans.'

"Raja Romapada said, 'Proceed.'

"And so it was that the pick of the palace courtesans stationed themselves near the ashram of Rishyashringa and began flaunting their charms in front of the severely self-controlled young ascetic. He had never stirred out of the ashram; from his birth he had never set eyes on a woman or man—nor indeed on any creature even resembling a human.

"It so happened that one day Rishyashringa stepped out of the ashram and came, quite by chance, to the camp of the courtesans. He saw the bewitching ladies, in glorious dresses, singing sweet melodies. They approached him and asked: 'Who are you? Whose son are you? Why are you alone in this lost and lonely forest?'

"They were beautiful, he had never seen women before, there was something in their figures that mysteriously attracted and enchanted him; he could not prevent himself, he blurted out, 'My father is Vibhandaka. I am the fruit of his loins. My name is Rishyashringa. I practise penance here. My ashram is nearby. You are lovely. Come with me and receive my puja and hospitality.'

"They quickly accepted. Rishyashringa—so the legend goes—offered them the promised puja as soon as they set foot in the ashram. 'Here is the *arghya* water to wash your hands and feet. Here are roots and shoots and fruits.'

"They were impressed with the welcome, but afraid that Rishyashringa's father might return any time, and anxious to leave as soon as possible.

"Before leaving, they said, 'Sir, we have some delicious fruits for you. Please accept them.' They embraced and caressed him, and fed him with snuggly round sweets. He had never seen such sweets before, so he enjoyed them as fruits, thinking, *No forest ascetic has ever tasted these.*

"Pretending they were going to observe a sacred fast, the courtesans left.

"The young Brahmin Rishyashringa, born of the race of Kashyapa, felt uneasy; there was a strange disturbance in his heart. He did not know what was happening to him.

"The creatures haunted him. He could not forget them. They ruled his mind; they would not depart.

"Next day Rishyashringa went to meet the enchanting beings who wore gorgeous dresses. They came forward joyfully and welcomed him, saying, 'Come here, friend. Come to our ashram.'

"They beguiled him, saying, 'We have roots and fruits of all kinds. We have delightful games for you. Come inside; we can give you more pleasure there than here.'

"Their honey-sweet words captivated the heart of the young ascetic. Readily agreeing, he accompanied them to the capital of King Romapada.

"The pleasure-giving ladies took the mahatma Brahmin in a boat across the Ganga to the land of Anga.

"While he was being escorted by them, there were sudden showers of heavy rain.

"The earth rejoiced.

"The king of Anga noticed the rejuvenating rain falling in coincidence with the arrival of Rishyashringa.

"He stepped out to welcome the Brahmin. He bowed low and touched the sage's feet with his head.

"He placed before Rishyashringa the traditional *arghya* offerings of fruits and water. He begged his guest to grant him one boon—that Vibhandaka, Rishyashringa's father, would not take offence because of his son's absence.

"Then he conducted the young ascetic to the inner apartments and joyfully gave his daughter Shanta in marriage to him. Respected and honoured, Rishyashringa passed his days happily with his wife Shanta."

Sumantra ended, "The shining sage Sanatkumara had further predicted that Dasharatha, a raja of great dharma, would take birth in the Ikshvaku dynasty, and would need the help of Romapada."

So Dasharatha approached his friend, King Romapada of Anga, and asked for the services of Rishyashringa as the officiating priest of the Horse Sacrifice. "I do not have a son," he said, "I want the help of the husband of Shanta, Rishyashringa."

Raja Romapada replied, "With pleasure." Turning to Rishyashringa, he said, "It will please me if you and your wife Shanta go to Raja Dasharatha's capital."

The ladies of the palace joyfully welcomed large-eyed Shanta and escorted her to the inner apartments. Shanta and her husband

passed a long and happy time in the palace of Dasharatha.

When spring came—unexpectedly enchanting that year—Raja Dasharatha touched Rishyashringa's feet with his head; the divinely radiant ascetic replied, "Let the site of the sacrifice be chosen on the northern bank of the Sarayu. Release the horse and collect the materials."

Dasharatha did as instructed; then, summoning the learned Brahmins and other scholars, he said, "I have decided to perform the Horse Sacrifice with the help of Rishyashringa. I do so in order to fulfil my desire to have an heir."

"This is an act of dharma. You will surely have more than one son; you will have four splendid sons," they replied and set about collecting the materials and completing the preliminaries for the sacrifice.

Next year, with the return of another spring, Dasharatha approached Vasishtha, offered him respectful puja, and said humbly: "Holy one, you are my guru, you seek my welfare, you love me deeply. I request you to conduct the sacrifice as enjoined in the scriptures. Let no efforts be spared to achieve ritual perfection."

Vasishtha replied, "It will be done."

Vasishtha speedily summoned elderly and other Brahmins experienced in ritual observances and details of sacrificial architecture. He engaged artists, carpenters, astrologers, artisans, mathematical experts, experts in singing and dancing, pure-minded scholars of the scriptures, and other professionals and all-rounders. "Let the great work start!" he said to them. "Brick mansions, stocked with every convenience and variety of food, to please the tastes of royal and other guests; elaborate dwellings for visitors from abroad; stables for horses, shelters for elephants, rooms for soldiers from remote lands. . . . Show correct respect and offer generous hospitality to each caste as it deserves. Let there be no taint of anger, selfishness, or lust. Work as a team. Specialists and menials, artisans and labourers—let all hearts unite in the fulfilment of a giant task."

Six pillars of *bilva* were erected, six of *khadira*, six of *palasha*, one of *shleshmataka*, two of Himalayan *deodar*, spaced six feet from each other. Twenty-one pillars, each gold-worked, each

twenty-one feet high; octangular pillars, brilliantly polished, decorated with embroidered cloths, with sandalpaste and flowers, as dazzling as the Seven Sages in the sky of the Great Bear constellation.

Serpents, birds, turtles and other creatures, as ordained in the scriptures, were tied to the pillars—three hundred of them—as sacrificial victims. Among them was the priceless gem, Raja Dasharatha's own horse.

*Queen Kaushalya circled
And consecrated the horse.
With three strokes of a sword,
She severed the horse's head.
Eager to acquire dharma,
The serene-minded queen slept that night
With the corpse of the wind-swift horse.
Then the four officiating priests
Instructed the three wives of Dasharatha—
Kaushalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi—
To approach and caress the dead beast.
His senses fully controlled,
Rishyashringa cooked the fat of the horse,
And Raja Dasharatha, to expiate his sins,
Inhaled the odorous fumes.
The sixteen priests, one by one,
Consigned the limbs of the horse to the sacred fire.
The three-day Horse Sacrifice ended.*

The priests said to the sin-cleansed king, "Sire, only you can protect this vast earth. We are scholars in the Vedas; the earth holds no attraction for us, and we know little of how to attend to worldly matters. If it pleases your majesty, grant us anything—gems, gold, cows—but nothing involving overlordship of the earth."

The king gifted them ten thousand cows, ten crores of gold coins, and four times that many silver coins; they handed over the wealth to Rishyashringa and Vasishtha, who distributed it equally among the deserving.

Having successfully completed the difficult Horse Sacrifice, Raja Dasharatha said to Rishyashringa: "Strict-vowed sage, the welfare of my race is in your hands."

"You will have four sons," replied the Brahmin, "to perpetuate the glory of your dynasty."

The mahatma king, pleased with the sweet words of Rishyashringa, joyfully did obeisance and continued the conversation.

Then Rishyashringa performed the Putreshti sacrifice, chanting Vedic mantras. The gods, led by Brahma, appeared. Brahma reflected: *Ravana's request was "Neither gandharvas, nor gods, nor rakshasas nor yakshas will be able to destroy me"; that request was granted. He thought man too trivial and left him out. A way must be found to destroy Ravana.*

Lord Vishnu appeared, dressed in saffron, carrying conch, discus, and mace, shining like the dazzling sun. The gods propitiated him:

*"Vishnu, lord, listen to our prayer!
Save mankind from the ravages of Ravana!"*

All-knowing Vishnu received the homage of the gods, and asked, "How can the ruler of the rakshasas be killed?"

Unanimously, the gods replied, "Become a human *avatara*, O Lord Vishnu, and kill him in battle!"

The sacrifice completed, Rishyashringa and his wife Shanta, escorted by Dasharatha for a part of the distance, left for his city.

Six seasons passed. It was in the twelfth month, on the ninth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra, with the star Punarvasu in the ascendant, and the Sun, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, and Venus exalted in their respective zodiacal signs of Aries, Capricorn, Libra, Cancer, and Pisces, and with Jupiter and the Moon conjoined in the zodiacal sign Karka, that the eldest wife of Dasharatha, Kaushalya, gave birth to Rama, the universally honoured lord of the worlds, the glory of the Ikshvaku dynasty, the auspiciously marked one, with pink-rimmed eyes, long arms, red lips, and a voice as richly mellow as the sound of a kettledrum. His radiance added to the

loveliness of Kaushalya, as Indra's radiance enhanced the beauty of Aditi.

The youngest wife of Dasharatha, Kaikeyi, gave birth to Bharata, who possessed a quarter of the glory of Vishnu and his virtues.

To Sumitra, the second wife of Dasharatha, were born the twins Shatrughna and Lakshmana, expert in the use of weapons, and possessing one quarter of the glory of Vishnu.

The four mahatma sons of Dasharatha were handsome, filled with all virtues, and shining like the stars in the four quarters.

*The gandharvas sang,
And apsaras danced,
Divine drums sounded,
And flowers fell from the sky,
And the streets of the capital
Were crowded with actors and dancers,
And the citizens celebrated
With merrymaking and music-making.*

Gentle and humble, devoted to the study of the Vedas, skilled in archery, the children grew up in the palace. Raja Dasharatha, mahatma of dharma, began discussing their marriage with his family priests and ministers. It was during the course of one such discussion that the great sage Vishvamitra arrived unannounced and said to the palace door-keepers, "Send word to the king that Vishvamitra, son of Gadhi, is here."

Raja Dasharatha received him with reverence, saying:

*"Like nectar,
Like rain in a desert,
Like the birth of a son by a good wife
to an heirless man,
Like wealth recovered that one had thought
lost for ever,
Is your arrival, O great sage!
I am blessed by your presence.
You have visited me:
My life is fulfilled at last!*

*You who were once Kshatriya
 Became Brahmin by the strength of your penance.
 You do me great honour today.
 What is your desire, noble one?
 You are like a god to me—
 What service can I lay at your feet?"*

Vishwamitra replied, "Sire, I have resolved to perform a sacrifice to achieve my spiritual aims. Two rakshasas are bent on frustrating me. They can assume any form they like. Their names are Maricha and Subahu; they are strong, they are vicious; they are always polluting my altar with blood-dripping marrow. I cannot curse them, for a curse would defile the sacrifice. Lend me the services of your son, sire; let me have Rama, the brave one whose side-locks curve like crow's-wings over his ears; I will protect him, and he will kill the rakshasas. Let me have lotus-eyed Rama by my side for the ten nights of the sacrifice. Be gracious and let my sacrifice proceed as planned. May you prosper, Sire !"

Dasharatha trembled and felt faint. He steadied himself. The words of Vishwamitra pained him. "My lotus-eyed Rama is not yet sixteen. How can he fight rakshasas? He is a child; he has no experience of actual combat; he does not know how to gauge the strength or weakness of an enemy. You know, great sage, how cunning and heinous rakshasas are. Tell me, who are these two you mention, and how powerful are they? Is it not possible for me and my army to overcome them?"

"Sire," replied Vishwamitra, "it is really Ravana who is behind this. He is descended from the sage Pulastya, one of the nine mind-born sons of Brahma. He is incredibly powerful. He is assisted by a horde of rakshasas. He is Vishravas' son and Kubera's half-brother. He does not himself interfere with what he considers petty sacrifices, but deposes two mighty rakshasas, Maricha and Subahu, to do the mischief for him."

Raja Dasharatha listened carefully and said, "If gods, gandharvas, anti-gods, yakshas, birds and reptiles cannot defeat Ravana, as you imply, how can a mortal do so? How can I give you my inexperienced son? What chance has he against the sons of Sunda and Upasunda? I refuse. Let me face them in single combat. Or let my relatives do so. But not my son."

Vishvamitra heard the father's concern for the welfare of his son, and a fierce anger seized him. "You promised to serve me, and now you go back on your word! Is this action worthy of a Raghava? So be it, then: I will return. Your words have no value. Keep them. Be happy with them—and may your friends be happy with you."

The earth shook; even the gods were afraid. The patient sage Vasishtha suggested to the king, "You are an Ikshvaku, Sire. You are the very personification of dharma. You cannot abandon dharma. You are honoured in the three worlds as the soul of dharma. You have given your word; you must keep it. Let holy Vishvamitra have Rama. If Vishvamitra so wished, he could have routed the rakshasas himself. But he seeks to enhance the glory of your son. That is why he appeals to you."

The advice of Vasishtha restored reason to the mind of Dasharatha. Calling Rama and Lakshmana to the court, Dasharatha affectionately smelt the heads of his eldest son and Lakshmana, and entrusted both to the care of Vishvamitra. Vishvamitra walked ahead; behind him came Rama, bow in hand, with crow's-wing locks of hair curving over and covering his ears; and behind Rama came Lakshmana.

Twelve miles from the capital, along the southern bank of the Sarayu, Vishvamitra turned to Rama and said gently, "Sip this water, my child. We have no time to lose. Let me quickly instruct you and Lakshmana in the mantras known as Bala and Atibala. After you have uttered them, you will never feel fatigue, disease, or age. No one will be your equal in the three worlds. In wisdom, skill and good fortune, you will be unrivalled."

Sipping the water as instructed, Rama received the mantras from the great rishi. He shone with the dazzle of the thousand-rayed autumnal sun. The three passed the night happily on the bank of the Sarayu. The two princes slept on a lowly bed of grass, swathed in the sweet words of Vishvamitra on that exquisitely peaceful night.

Next morning, early at dawn, the two brothers performed their devotions and followed Vishvamitra to the bank of the Ganga. The mahatma sages of the ashram accompanied them and showed

them a splendid boat, saying, "Hurry and board this boat and continue your auspicious journey." Offering respectful puja to the sages, Vishvamitra and the two brothers crossed the Ganga. Mid-river, Rama and Lakshmana heard wave thudding on wave, and asked, "Why is there so much noise, holy one?"

Vishvamitra replied:

*"Rama,
On Mount Kailasa is Manasa,
The lake of the mind,
Born of the creative imagination of Brahma.
The river Sarayu, rising in Manasa,
Flows through Ayódhya.
Here it meets the Ganga,
And the clash of their waters
Is the sound you have heard.
Pay homage here, Rama,
With deep meditation."*

The brothers genuflected. Reaching the southern bank, they left the boat and traversed swiftly ahead on foot. In front of them loomed a fierce, desolate forest. Rama turned to Vishvamitra and asked:

*"Holy one,
This dark and fearful forest,
With crickets chirping and beasts roaring,
And vultures and other birds screaming,
Filled with boars, lions, tigers and elephants,
With trees of all kinds—
Dhava, ashvakarna, kakubha, bilva,
Patala, tinduka, and jujube—
This is a forest
Of insidious and shuddering enchantment."*

"Yes," replied the great ascetic Vishvamitra, "Listen, my child, and I will tell you something about this forest. A long time ago there used to be two cities here—Malada and Karusha—two prosperous cities created by the gods. A wicked Yakshini called

Tataka was born here. She could take any form she liked and she had the strength of a thousand elephants. She became the wife of Sunda; and her son is the rakshasa Maricha, a long-armed, huge-mouthed, giant-bodied creature. This vicious Yakshini terrorises the people here, wreaking havoc among the Maladas and Karushas. She lives about twelve miles away from here. Let us skirt warily along the forest of Tataka, for you will have to destroy her today with the strength of your arms. Free this territory of the thorn of Tataka! I command you to do so. As long as this ogress lives, no one has the courage to enter this forest."

Rama discreetly asked the extraordinary sage, "Excellent one, I have heard that Yakshinis are feeble creatures. How is it this one has the strength of a thousand elephants?"

Vishvamitra replied softly, "Let me tell you why. She was granted a boon. There was once a very powerful Yaksha called Suketu. A good person, but he was childless; so he decided to do severe penance, as a result of which Pitamaha Brahma pleased, granted him, instead of a son, a daughter as strong as a thousand elephants. That girl is Tataka. Suketu married his incomparably lovely daughter to Sunda, the son of Jambha. A son was born to her; his name is Maricha, a strong, monstrous creature; though born a Yaksha, he became, as a result of a curse, a flesh-eating rakshasa. It so happened that when the sage Agastya cursed Sunda to die, Tataka and her son vowed to devour Agastya. The holy sage Agastya saw her rushing at him, and then and there he cursed her and her son saying, 'Turn into rakshasa flesh-eaters!' He cursed Tataka again saying, 'Lose all your loveliness and become a horrendous-looking rakshasi!' That is why Tataka is obsessed now with disrupting the holy rites of this territory where Agastya once meditated. Kill this woman, Rama; she has no dharma in her. Don't be horrified. Forget your scruples. It is a Kshatriya's duty to protect people. To kill a woman may seem disgusting to you. But remember in the past how Indra killed Virochana's daughter Manthara because she was bent on ravaging the earth. Remember how Vishnu himself killed Bhrigu's wife (who was the mother of Kavya) because she wanted to destroy Indra. Many mahatma princes have killed women of adharma. Shake off your qualms, and do as I say."

Rama lifted his bow and twanged the string; the four quarters

reverberated with the noise. It stunned and confused Tataka. Bewildered and enraged, she rushed angrily in the direction of the sound. Rama saw the grotesque giant Yakshini bearing down on him, and he said to Lakshmana:

*"Lakshmana, what a disgusting monster!
A coward would collapse seeing her!
I shall slice off her nose and ears.
It will not be easy,
For she knows the magic of maya.
I will spare her life,
For she is a woman, after all.
But I will immobilise her,
And render her harmless."*

Even as he was saying this, the gruesome figure of Tataka, shrieking and howling, towered over him with upraised arms.

Vishvamitra blocked her with a mantra "*Hun!*", and shouted, "*Jaya, Rama!*"

Tataka resorted to maya and scattered a shower of rocks on the two brothers. Rama, angered, disintegrated the rock-swarm. She lunged at him. He cut off both her arms. Lakshmana sliced off the ears and nose of the writhing monster. She assumed one form after another in a desperate bid to escape; she tried to enchant and mesmerise the princes with lovely shapes; she became invisible, briefly bewildering Rama and Lakshmana. She lumbered around wildly, hurling huge rocks at them.

"Enough of mercy, Rama!" advised Vishvamitra. "Kill her—and kill her now! For if you don't, she will use her maya to redouble her strength, and start despoiling our sacred rituals again. Twilight is gaining on us—and rakshasas become immune at twilight. Descendant of Raghu, there is no time to waste!"

Rama selected from his quiver special arrows sensitive to sound and fired them at the Yakshini. Employing all the wiles of her maya, roaring with rage, she rushed at Rama and Lakshmana through the cluster of arrows like an irresistible thunderbolt. Rama stopped her with a single shaft; it pierced her breast; she fell down, dead.

And immediately Indra and the other gods praised the feat of

Rama with shouts of "*Sadhu! Sadhu!* Excellent! Excellent!"

They rested that night in the forest and, next morning, Vishvamitra, smiling, praised Rama. "I am happy with you, brave prince. May you prosper! I will give you weapons with which you will be able to rout gods, anti-gods, gandharvas, and nagas. These are divine weapons, Rama. Accept them."

Rama received the weapons, and gratefully said to radiant Vishvamitra, "Revered one, finest of sages, these weapons will make me invincible even against the gods. Instruct me further in the secrets of their discharge and recall." And Vishvamitra taught the two brothers the use of mantras for release and return of these special missiles.

They came to an ancient, deserted but charming ashram on the outskirts of Mithila. Rama asked excellent Vishvamitra, "Radiant one, why is this beautiful ashram in ruins and uninhabited? Whose ashram was it?"

The sage of remarkable penance, pleasing-voiced Vishvamitra replied, "Listen, and I will tell you about the incomparable mahatma whose ashram this was and who cursed it. This was the ashram of the sage Gautama. Even the gods used to visit this place. It was in this ashram that Gautama and his wife Ahalya practised severe *tapasya* for many years.

"It so happened that one day, knowing that Gautama was absent, Shachi's husband Indra—none other than the thousand-eyed chief god himself—turned up at the ashram disguised as an ascetic and said to Ahalya, 'Those who seek pleasure, lovely lady, see no reason why they should postpone it till after three days of a woman's period. Slim-waisted beauty, I desire you, and I want to make love to you now.'

"Ahalya saw through the disguise and knew it was thousand-eyed Indra soliciting; but the foolish woman, eager to embrace the king of the gods, succumbed. After the consummation of her desire, she said to the chief god, 'I am fulfilled, lord Go quickly now. See that Gautama knows nothing of this.'

"Indra smiled and replied, 'Lovely-limbed lady, I am fulfilled too. I will slip away now, as I came, unobserved.'

"After sexually enjoying her, Indra hurriedly left the thatched

hut, because he was afraid of Gautama.

"That very instant, however, he glimpsed the great sage Gautama returning. Purified by his holy bath, radiant with the strength of his *tapasya*, blazing like fire, so powerful that even the gods and anti-gods would fail to overcome him, Gautama returned, carrying faggots for the ritual sacrifice and blades of *kusha* grass.

"Indra saw him and stopped, shamefaced.

"Noticing the thousand-eyed god standing there guiltily in the garb of an ascetic—a perfect duplicate of himself—Gautama said angrily, 'This is an immoral thing you have done, appearing here in my disguise on your lustful mission. May your testicles drop off and may you become impotent!'

"No sooner had mahatma Gautama uttered his fierce curse than the thousand-eyed god's testicles fell on the ground.

"After cursing Indra, Gautama loosed his anger on his wife. 'And you—you will lie here in this ashram for thousands of years, without food or water, invisible to all creatures, expiating your misdeed, until such time as Rama, the invincible son of Dasha-ratha, sets foot in this fearful forest; then you will be redeemed. You will first offer him hospitality; and the offer of hospitality will cleanse you of your flesh-lust and self-love. Then only will you re-assume your original body.'

"Casting this dreadful imprecation on the misbehaving woman, Gautama left the ashram and retired to the Himalayas to practise severe penance on a delightful peak visited by Siddhas and Charanas.

"Minus his testicles, terrified, Indra approached the gods led by Agni and said, 'I interfered with the *tapasya* of mahatma Gautama, and I roused his anger. I wanted to help the gods by doing so, and I succeeded. He has stripped me of my virility, and he has cursed his wife Ahalya. By doing so, he has cancelled all the merits he gained from his penance. Excellent gods, I have helped you; now I need your help; help me recover my testicles!'

"The appeal of Indra persuaded the gods, with Agni as leader, to approach the spirits of the ancestors. Agni said to the *pitris*:

" 'Here is Indra deprived of his testicles; here is a ram with testicles. Graft the ram's testicles on Indra. The castrated ram will bring you joy. From today you will offer undying and lavish rewards to all men who sacrifice a castrated ram to you.'

"The words of Agni convinced the *pitris*. They cut the testicles of the ram and grafted them on Indra's genital region. And so it is, descendant of Raghu, that from that day, as proof of the power of Gautama's *tapasya*, Indra has the testicles of a ram.

"This is the ashram of Gautama. Enter, Rama, and free the extraordinarily auspicious, lovely-as-a-goddess Ahalya."

Guided by Vishvamitra, Rama and Lakshmana entered the ashram. They saw lovely Ahalya, radiating beauty as a result of her long penance, and till now invisible—not even gods and gandharvas could see her.

*Cursed by Gautama,
She became a prisoner of maya-magic
That is created by the Creator,
Like bright flame obscured by smoke,
Like the moon veiled in cloud,
Like sunlight flickering in water
And now she reappeared,
Redeemed by the arrival of Rama.*

Following Vishvamitra, the two brothers travelled in a north-easterly direction till they arrived at the site of King Janaka's sacrificial altar. Rama said, "What a magnificent *yajna*! Thousands of Brahmins from different parts of the country, all wise in the Vedas! Hundreds of carts carrying their belongings and the necessities for the sacrifice! Let us rest here for a while, holy one."

King Janaka received them with great respect and courtesy and, with palms joined in *anjali*, said to Vishvamitra, "Holy sir, please be seated along with the other great sages present here."

Questioned by Mahatma Janaka, Vishvamitra introduced the two young men as sons of Dasharatha; he gave an account of their arduous journey and stay in the Siddha ashram, their destruction of rakshasas, their meeting with Ahalya and conversation with Gautama, and their visit to Mithila with the purpose of examining the great bow. Having said all this to Mahatma Janaka, *Maha-muni* Vishvamitra was silent.

Strict-vowed Shatananda, the eldest son of Gautama, rejoiced when he heard of the feats of Rama.

"You are welcome, O finest of men," he said to Rama, "it is our great good fortune that you have come to us with the illustrious Vishvamitra, who is the son of the great Kushika. Let me tell you the story of Vishvamitra.

"Vishvamitra, of Kshatriya birth, observed strict vows for one thousand years. The gods, impressed, came to reward him with the fruits of his *tapasya*. Extraordinarily radiant Brahma praised him, 'May you prosper! May you become a *rishi* as a result of your discipline.'

"Brahma said this and returned to heaven. Vishvamitra continued his marvellous *tapasya* with even greater devotion.

"A long time passed, and the most ravishing *apsara* of all, Menaka, came one day to bathe in the Pushkara lake.

"Kushika's son Vishvamitra saw Menaka: she was bewitchingly beautiful, like lightning flashing in dark-blue cloud.

"Pierced by the arrows of the god of love, 'Welcome to my ashram, O *apsara*,' Vishvamitra said to Menaka. 'Be loving to me, for I love you.'

"Enchanting Menaka stayed in the ashram with Vishvamitra; her presence there frustrated much of his strict *tapasya*. Five years passed in this manner; then another five, with Menaka happy, living in Vishvamitra's ashram.

"But *Maha-muni* Vishvamitra felt ashamed about the relationship; it worried him. After ten years it occurred to him that he had fallen victim to a plot by the gods to cancel the surpassing excellence of his penances.

"He thought: *Ten years! And they have passed like a day and a night. I have become a slave to my lust. My discipline is destroyed!*

"Remorse-stricken, he brooded, distressed and paralysed, not knowing what to do.

"He noticed Menaka trembling with fear in front of him; her palms were joined in *anjali*; gently but firmly he asked her to leave.

"Determined to be celibate all his life in order to have purity of character by mastery over passions, Vishvamitra journeyed to the bank of the Kaushiki river. He practised the most mortifying austerities for a thousand years. The gods were aghast seeing the holy ascetic locked in absolute meditation on a mountain in the north.

"They approached Brahma, Grandsire of the worlds, and supp-

licated: 'Grant the title of Maharshi to Vishvamitra!'

"Brahma said to Vishvamitra, 'You have not yet mastered your passions. Try harder, excellent ascetic.'

"Vishvamitra, excelling in ascetic powers, stood alone, hands upraised, subsisting on air, for a thousand years. In the summer season, he was surrounded by the four fires of the four quarters of the earth and the fifth fire of the sun overhead; in winter, he remained standing in water night and day while the rains fell on his head.

"The austerities so agitated the gods that Indra went to the *apsara* Rambha and said, 'Rambha, help the gods. Stir lust in Vishvamitra and nullify his *tapasya*. This magnificent mission I entrust to you.'

"Rambha, fearful, palms joined in *anjali*, replied, 'His temper is fatal. He will curse me. I am afraid. Forgive me, lord. Have pity on me.'

"Indra saw her apprehensive and trembling; the thousand-eyed god assured her, 'Do not fear, Rambha. You will succeed. Do as I say. I will become a sweetly-singing *kokila* and be near you when trees flower in spring time and the god of love reigns in the world. You are supremely seductive. It is not possible for Vishvamitra to resist you.'

"Agreeing, Rambha, most exquisite of *apsaras*, smiling sweetly, approached Vishvamitra. He heard the song of the *kokila*, and he gazed at the *apsara*, fascinated. A faint suspicion rose in his mind at the surpassing sweetness of the song and the unparalleled loveliness of the lady. *It must be the mischief-making mind of Indra*, he thought, and angrily he cursed Rambha:

" 'Rambha,
*You knew I was fighting lust and anger,
 You dared to seduce me!
 Become a stone for ten thousand years,
 Foolish woman!*
 —*Until such time as the Brahmin Vasishtha
 Redeems you from your punishment.*'

"Immediately, Vishvamitra regretted his words, realising how anger had again wiped out the fruits of his penance.

"Rambha was transformed into a rock and Indra fled.

"Vishvamitra then resolved:

" 'No more!

Never more!

Never more will I lose my temper!

Never more will I speak an angry word!

I will chasten and subdue myself!

I shall control my breathing for hundreds of years!

I will become a Brahmin!

I will not breathe, I will not eat,

I will stand firm.

I will be firm!

I will not allow my limbs to decay!' "

Next day, in the clear light of dawn, King Janaka sent for Mahatma Vishvamitra and the two princes. He greeted them as recommended in the scriptures, and said, "This is the great bow. There is a story behind its lying here."

"Once upon a time," continued Janaka, "there was a king named Devavrata. The gods left this bow in his charge. It so happened that Shiva's father-in-law Daksha was performing a great *yajna* once; Shiva picked up this bow in order to frustrate the sacrifice and warned the assembled gods, 'You have forgotten to set aside my share of the sacrificial offerings. You have been warned, celestial ones! I will slice off your dazzling limbs with the help of this bow!'

"The gods pleaded with Shiva, and he was conciliated. He handed over the bow to the mahatma gods, and they in turn left it in trust with my illustrious ancestor Devavrata.

"I was ploughing the sacrificial field one day. Imagine my surprise when my ploughshare uncovered a baby. I adopted her after naming her 'Sita' or the 'Furrow'. My daughter is not a womb-born child. When the time for her marriage approached, I made it clear that I was looking for a royal suitor of exceptional valour. I refused to give her away to any ordinary prince. Many kings have come here; all have been shown the bow of Shiva; all have tried, but none as yet has succeeded in so much as lifting it. The question of bending and stringing it does not arise."

Maha-muni Vishvamitra said quickly, "Let the bow be placed before Rama."

Janaka ordered the bow brought. It required five hundred tall and powerful cart-pullers to draw the eight-wheeled vehicle on which the chest containing the bow was lying.

With palms joined in *anjali*, Janaka said to Vishvamitra and the two princes, "Here is the bow, which is venerated by the kings of our dynasty though none has succeeded in bending it. The gods, anti-gods, rakshasas, gandharvas, yakshas, and nagas have failed also. How will a mere mortal succeed in bending and stringing it? But here it is, excellent ascetic. Let the two princes examine it."

Vishvamitra turned to the Raghava prince Rama and said, "Rama, child, what do you think?"

Rama opened the chest, looked at the bow, and replied, "It is a divine bow, excellently made. I will run my fingers on it. Yes, I will lift it and bend it."

"Splendid!" said the raja and the *muni*.

With Vishvamitra's approval, Rama, as if playing a game, jerked the bow up and strung it in front of thousands of spectators. He continued to bend it to breaking point.

With a crash of thunder, like a mountain cracking apart, it snapped. Stunned by the reverberating noise, all the people, except Vishvamitra, the king, and the two princes, fell on the ground.

At the auspicious hour called the Vijaya, propitious for a wedding, Rama and his brothers dressed for the nuptials. The sage Vasishtha said to Janaka, king of the Videhas, "Sire, Raja Dasharatha, with his sons, is waiting for the one who will give away his daughters. For such is the custom—gifts are possible only with the mutual consent of giver and receiver. This is your dharma. Let the auspicious nuptials begin."

Radiantly powerful Janaka, in response to Mahatma Vasishtha, said aloud to Dasharatha, "Who stands as guardian of my door? Whose permission does the royal guest require? This kingdom is yours. Why should you hesitate to step inside your own house? My daughters wait near the sacred fire like flickering flames. Let the ceremony commence. I am eager to start. Let there be no more delay."

Dasharatha escorted his sons into the wedding pavilion.

Raja Janaka turned to Vasishtha, "I request you, venerable one, to solemnise the marriage ceremony of Rama, who is Lokarama the Delight of the World."

Led by Vishvamisra and dharma-following Shatananda, the sage of great *tapasya* Vasishtha prepared an altar in the centre of the pavilion and had it decorated with sandalpaste and flowers, gold platters, colourful vases, potted plants, incense cups, conches, large *sruk* ladles, small *sruvas* ladles, bowls filled with *arghya* offerings, and vessels containing unshelled rice roasted in turmeric powder. Scattering *darbha* grass on the altar, the great sage Vasishtha commenced the sacred oblations with the recitation of mantras.

After the offerings to Agni, he escorted Sita, dazzling with jewels, to the sacred fire and seated her opposite Rama.

Raja Janaka said to Rama, "This is my daughter Sita, now your life-partner in dharma. Take her hand in yours, and accept her. May both of you prosper. She is a lady of good fortune. She will be devoted to you, as faithful as a shadow."

To the chanting of mantras, Raja Janaka poured the water in the palm of his hand into Rama's palm.

There was a rain of flowers from the sky; divine drums sounded; the gods and celestial sages exclaimed, "*Sadhu! Sadhu! Excellent! Excellent!*"

After bestowing his daughter Sita, Raja Janaka said to Lakshmana, "Come, Lakshmana. May you prosper too. I give you Urmila. Accept her. The time is auspicious; let there be no delay."

Then Janaka said to Bharata, "Descendant of Raghu, take the hand of Mandavi in yours."

Next, to Shatrughna, "Mighty-armed prince, take the hand of Shrutakirti in yours."

To all of them he said, "Heroes all of you—you who are gentle and disciplined—these girls will now be your wives. The time is auspicious; let the marriage ceremony be solemnised."

The four mahatma brothers, clasping the hands of the four princesses, circled the sacred fire, the raja and the *rishis*, in accordance with the rites of the traditional scriptures.

So they were married.

And kettledrums sounded.

*And there was music and chanting.
And flowers fell from the sky.
Apsaras danced and gandharvas sang.
Such a muster of marvels!
While the music played,
The Raghava princes thrice circled the sacred fire;
And escorted their wives to their tents.
Raja Janaka, his relatives, and the rishis
Watched them retire;
Then they retired too.*

*How Rama loved Sita!
He was grateful to his father
For choosing such a wife.
He loved her for she was lovely,
He loved her for she was virtuous.
She loved him for he was handsome,
She loved him for he was good.
He was the lord of her heart.
Sita,
Princess of Mithila, daughter of Janaka,
Gracious as a goddess, as striking as Shri,
Lady of Lakshmi-like-loveliness,
Could read the mind of Rama
As clearly as her own.
He loved her completely:
Completely she loved him.
Son of the royal sage Dasharatha,
Rama was happy;
He shone with joy,
As Vishnu, lord of the gods, shines
In the company of his consort Shri.*

BOOK TWO

Ayodhya Kanda

THE CITY OF AYODHYA

*Raja Dasharatha loved his four sons
As if they were four arms of his body.
But Rama he loved specially,
Rama was as glorious as Self-Born Brahma.
Rama was divine Vishnu
Incarnated as man to destroy Ravana.
Kaushalya shone with the glory of her son,
As Aditi shines with hers,
Thunder-wielding Indra.*

Rama was handsome

brave

unmalicious

serene

soft-spoken

*Rama never rebuked when maligned
Rama was pleased with the smallest kindness
Rama forgave a hundred pettinesses
Rama was lord of himself
He conversed only with the pious
And with his superiors in age and wisdom
Rama*

was always first to welcome visitors

always spoke sweetly

was humble about his prowess

Rama

never spoke an untruth

honoured the learned

loved his subjects

and was loved by them

Rama

honoured Brahmins

was always compassionate

wise in dharma

concerned about the needy

Rama

was a Kshatriya

devoted to duty

as a path to heaven

Rama

*eschewed frivolity
delighted in arguing
for and against*

Rama

*was young and energetic
a clear judge of character*

Rama

mastered the Vedas and their ancillary branches

Rama

excelled his father in the science of bowcraft

Rama

*knew Dharma
and Artha
and Kama*

Rama

*had an excellent memory
never revealed secrets
was thrifty when necessary
and generous as well*

Rama

*was alert and hardworking
praised the diligent
punished the guilty
and rewarded the innocent*

Rama

*wisely gathered revenue
justly spent income
discreetly suppressed violence*

Rama

*was learned in the Shastras
proficient in the arts
balanced in his pleasures
blending Dharma and Artha*

Rama

*was a consummate horseman
an unequalled archer
a hero of the chariot
skilled in hand combat
incapable of defeat*

by gods and anti-gods

Rama

was never jealous

never devious

never over-ecstatic

nor over-depressed

Rama

was the lord of time

honoured by the three worlds

Such

was the glory of Rama

Even the earth desired him as her lord!

The representatives of the citizens of Ayodhya, the mahatma counsellors, the Brahmins and the army generals said to Raja Dasharatha, "Your son is extraordinary, Sire. You have ruled for many years, and you are now old. Your son is like Lord Vishnu himself. Appoint him prince regent. The intensity of his self-discipline makes him outshine the sun."

They supplicated him with palms joined in *anjali*, and Raja Dasharatha, pleased, replied, "It will be done. My beloved son Rama will be installed prince regent. This is the sacred month of Chaitra, the season of flowering trees. Commence preparations."

After the citizens had left, Dasharatha consulted his ministers and said, "Tomorrow the constellation Pushya will be in the ascendant. Order the installation ceremony of lotus-eyed Rama for that day."

Instructing his charioteer and chief minister Sumantra to inform Rama, Dasharatha entered the inner apartments.

When Sumantra came to him, Rama asked, "What does my noble father desire?"

"His majesty wishes to see you, if you are free."

Rama hurried to the palace. He prostrated himself, with palms joined in *anjali*, in front of his father. Dasharatha raised him gently, embraced him warmly, offered him a seat, and said, "Rama, I have grown old. I have enjoyed all luxuries, I have performed many sacrifices, made large gifts of foodgrains, and distributed liberal guru-fees. You, my son, are the ideal heir I wanted. You

have no equal. I have decided to install you heir-apparent tomorrow. This will be done when your brother Bharata is absent. Bharata is a man of dharma, and will obey you who are his elder brother, but even the best of good men are not always constant in their goodness. They have been known to act on impulse. You can go now."

Rama took leave of his father, and returned to his own palace. Hurriedly, he came out again to visit his mother Kaushalya in the ladies' apartments. Dressed in silk, she was praying for his welfare in front of the house deity.

"Mother," said Rama, "my father wishes me to accept the duty of ruling his people. He is installing me prince regent tomorrow. My teachers have advised that Sita and I should spend the night fasting; this is father's will, too. Let whatever is necessary be provided for the rituals that have to be performed."

Tears of joy welled up in Kaushalya's eyes. She whispered indistinctly, "O my dear Rama! Child, may you live long! My fasting has not been in vain. Lotus-eyed Vishnu has answered my prayers. You were born under an auspicious star."

Rama turned to his brother Lakshmana, who was standing beside him with palms joined in *anjali*, and said, "Lakshmana, help me rule the earth. You are like my second self. This happiness that will be mine is more yours than mine. My pleasures become pleasurable, my royal life becomes livable only because of you."

Rama bowed to his mothers Kaushalya and Sumitra and returned to his palace to be with Sita.

*And the main roads of Ayodhya
Were scattered with flowers
And the perfume of incense
By the rejoicing citizens;
And massive torches, tall as trees,
Turned night into day;
And there was noisy joy
At the crossroads;
And the city of Ayodhya, teeming with crowds,
Resembled the capital of Indra;
And the tumult was such
That the multitudinous capital swelled and sounded like the sea*

*Surging with wallowing whales
And serpentine sea creatures.*

Queen Kaikeyi had a maid of unknown antecedents, by the name of Manthara, who had been with her from childhood.

Manthara climbed to the moon-white balcony of the palace one day and saw the city of Ayodhya ablaze with beauty.

*The main roads watered clean,
Decorated with lotuses and lilies. . .
Pennants waving and flags fluttering. . .
Sandalwood fragrance. . .
Brahmins carrying flowers and sweets. . .
Sparkling crystal doors of temples. . .
Musical instruments playing. . .
Crowds thronging the streets. . .
Chantings from the Vedas. . .
Elephants ambling, horses neighing,
Bulls snorting, cows lowing . .*

So many colourful flags, so many celebrating citizens—the spectacle puzzled Manthara.

She approached Rama's nurse, who was dressed in white silk, and asked, "What has happened? Why is Rama's mother so joyfully distributing wealth everywhere? Why are the citizens of Ayodhya wild with ecstasy? What makes the king so happy?"

The nurse, brimming with joy herself, told the hunchback maid, "Don't you know tomorrow the Pushya constellation's in the ascendant—and our Raja Dasharatha is installing faultless Rama heir-apparent?"

Irritated, the hunchback hurried down from the balcony. Bent on mischief, and suspecting sinister motivation, Manthara went to Kaikeyi, who was lounging on a couch, and said, "Fool! Is this a time to relax? Disaster stares you in the face. Wake up! Can't you see the flood of sorrow that's about to drown you? It's silly to be proud of your good looks when the king doesn't even care. Your good luck is about to dry up, like a river bed in the peak of summer."

Kaikeyi listened to the hunchback's harsh words. Fearing an intrigue, she asked worriedly, "What is the matter, Manthara? Why are you so upset?"

The gentle manner of Kaikeyi's questioning made Manthara resort to fresh cunning. She was shrewd in speech; with concealed ill-meaning, she replied, "Devi, you are ruined! Raja Dasharatha has ordered that Rama be proclaimed prince regent! O Kaikeyi, I am so troubled. Your fortune is my fortune, your sorrow my sorrow. You are so innocent. Don't you realise how the king your husband has tricked you? He says he loves you, but his real love is Kaushalya. You are like a mother who fondly suckles a venomous snake. O you foolish woman, can't you see the snake at your breast? But now the truth is out. Raja Dasharatha has spurned you as he would a snake or an enemy. Sweet words—and sly deeds! By installing Rama he is insulting you. Act now. See through the trick—and save your son, save yourself, save me!"

Pleased with Manthara's words, ravishingly lovely Kaikeyi rose from her couch, radiant like the autumn moon. In gratified amazement, she placed a glittering jewel in Manthara's palm; then young Kaikeyi said casually, "This is welcome news indeed, Manthara. What better news could there be? I would like to reward you even more. I see no difference between Rama and Bharata. Rama heir-apparent! Heart-warming news! Your words are like nectar. Ask any favour, Manthara; I will refuse you nothing. You have made me so happy."

Manthara, in a fury of sorrowful anger, flung away the jewel, and said, "Happy? Have you lost your senses? What is there to be happy about? Can't you see how you have been humiliated? Can't you see the danger that lies ahead? O Devi, it hurts me to see this happening to you; I feel like laughing hysterically when I see you happy when you should be sad. When Rama becomes regent tomorrow, it is Kaushalya who will be the happy queen, because her husband trusts her. And you—you will be no better than her maid then—and so will all of us. And your son will be Rama's slave. While the lucky ladies of Rama's house rejoice, your daughter-in-law and her friends will watch and weep."

Devi Kaikeyi resented the bitter censure of Manthara, but continued her eulogy of Rama's character.

*"He knows dharma.
 He speaks the truth.
 He is filled with every virtue.
 He is grateful.
 He is disciplined.
 He is the eldest prince.
 He deserves the regency.
 He will cherish his brothers like a father.
 Why are you so agitated, hunchback,
 Over his installation?
 After Rama's regency is completed,
 Bharata will inherit the throne.
 Why are you upset, Manthara?
 This is an occasion for celebration.
 Surely you are intelligent.
 Bharata deserves honour;
 But so does Rama; more so.
 Rama respects me even more than he does Kaushalya.
 Rama on the throne
 Is the same as Bharata on the throne—
 Rama treats his brothers as his own self."*

Manthara sighed deeply. There was pain in her voice as she said, "You are sinking in an ocean of misery, and you refuse to accept the fact. You are supremely stupid! Rama will rule; then Rama's son will become king. Bharata is nowhere. And here I am, trying to help you, and you don't understand. You reward me for bringing you news of the advancement of your co-wife! Listen to me: when Rama gets the throne, his first act will be to exile or execute Bharata. Why are you blind to the simple fact that Bharata is Rama's rival? Why can't you make out which lion is mauling which elephant? Why can't you understand that Rama's mother Kaushalya is a threat to you? She hates you, because her husband loves you more. Act before it's too late. Any way you can, get Rama exiled, and Bharata crowned."

Kaikeyi sighed. Then, her face flushed with anger, she said, "I will today see to it that Rama is banished. I will get Bharata installed prince regent. Think. Can you suggest any means of doing this?"

Manthara, determined to destroy Rama, answered maliciously, "Kaikeyi, see what I do to make your son Bharata get the crown. Have you forgotten already, Kaikeyi, what I advised you earlier, or have you deliberately chosen to forget? Lovely lady, if you want me to repeat it to you now, then listen—but on one condition: after you have heard me, act!"

Kaikeyi half rose from her exquisite couch and said, "Manthara, tell me. Tell me how Rama can be removed and Bharata crowned."

"A long time ago," advised mean-minded Manthara, "during the pitched battle between the gods and the anti-gods, your husband attacked the city of Vijayanta in the Dandaka forest, which was ruled by a rakshasa called Timirdhvaja, also known as Shambara. Shambara was the anti-god leader; he knew so many subtle strategies that even the gods were afraid to challenge him. It was he who had attacked first, and his midnight massacres had reduced the army of the gods, commanded by Indra, to helplessness. Valiant Dasharatha was severely wounded—his body was pierced with scores of missiles fired by the anti-gods. He fell down senseless and had to be removed from the field of battle. Remember, you saved his life then. And he was grateful, so grateful that he offered you two boons. Lovely lady, you said to him, 'I will claim them when I'm in need,' to which the mahatma king replied, 'With pleasure.' I knew nothing about the promise until you told me later about it, and I have not forgotten it, because I wish your welfare. It's simple: redeem your boons. Ask your husband, first, to install Bharata, and, second, to banish Rama for fourteen years. Fourteen years is enough for your son to win the love of his subjects. His sovereignty will then be secure. Daughter of Ashvapati, make up your mind. You will, today, enter the Chamber of Displeasure; you will go there in crumpled and soiled dress, you will lie down on the bare ground; you will sulk, you will refuse to look at the king or speak to him. He loves you. It will work. I haven't the slightest doubt. For you he will even enter fire. He cannot bear to see you angry; he will not refuse you. He will give his life for you, if it comes to that. Realise the force of your charms! Why are you so tardy? He will offer you jewels, gold, pearls, a wealth of precious things. Refuse them. Lovely lady, remind him of the two boons. Remind him of the war between the gods and the anti-gods and how you saved his life. Remember what you are after, and do not hesitate.

No wavering! When he gently lifts you up, and agrees to your request, insist: 'It is settled then—Rama exiled for fourteen years, and Bharata installed regent.' It is crucial that you say fourteen years, for time is needed to make your son firm in the hearts of the people. And demand Bharata's *immediate* regency. No compromise on these two points. Rama gone, your son will flourish; by the time Rama returns, your son will have nothing to fear—he will be surrounded by loyal relatives and friends, and the citizens will acknowledge him as the rightful ruler. Now is the right time. Act this very instant, and prevent the king from installing Rama regent.'

Like a young girl beguiled, Kaikeyi fell victim to Manthara's insidious influence. She said in astonished admiration, "You have given me good advice: I will follow it. You must be the most intelligent hunchback in the world. You wish me well—I know it. Without you, I would never have guessed the real intentions of the king. Most hunchbacks are horrible to look at—but not you, Manthara.

*You stoop like a lotus in the wind,
 You are charming.
 Your breasts are so large and lovely,
 Your navel coyly hides under them.
 You have graceful hips,
 Your face is spotless as the moon.
 Your smooth thighs are merry
 With a girdle of tinkling bells.
 Your feet are long and shapely,
 Your thighs touch each other.
 When you walk ahead of me, Manthara,
 Dressed in silk, you shimmer!
 You have more magic in your heart
 Than ever Shambura possessed.
 Your hump, large as a chariot wheel's hub,
 Stores a wealth of tact and tactic.
 When Bharata becomes prince regent,
 I'll place a chain of pure gold on your hump.
 When Rama is exiled,
 I'll anoint your hump with sandalwood scent,*

*I'll put a gold tilak on your forehead.
 With your exquisite dresses and ornaments,
 You will look like a goddess.
 I'll order hunchback girls to massage your feet
 Just as you massage mine, Manthara."*

Kaikeyi reclined on her couch like a flame glowing on an altar. Flattered, Manthara replied, "No point building a dam after the river's in spate. Rise, lovely lady, do what is good for you—go immediately to the king."

The large-eyed Devi Kaikeyi rose and, accompanied by Manthara, went to the Chamber of Displeasure. Proud of her beauty, she took off her expensive pearl necklace and other ornaments. She lay down on the floor and said to Manthara:

"Either Rama goes into exile and Bharata becomes regent, or I die here and you will report my death to the king. I do not want gold and jewels. I will not eat. I do not want carpets, unguents, garlands, sandalpaste, eye salve. I will not eat or drink till Rama is exiled to the forest."

In the meantime Raja Dasharatha completed all arrangements for the installation of Rama, and returned to the palace. He thought: *Kaikeyi does not know yet. The installation will be over with today.*

Like the moon sailing into a mass of white cloud, not anticipating eclipse, the king entered the female apartments. Parrots and peacocks and cranes and swans exhilarated the palace with their cries.

He was filled with sexual desire, and he noticed Kaikeyi was not in her bed. He longed to make love to her. He called for her, but there was no answer. She had never before been absent when he had wanted her.

He summoned the doorkeeper and questioned him. With palms joined in *anjali* the doorkeeper, trembling, replied, "Sire, the queen is angry. She has gone to the Chamber of Displeasure."

Confused and agitated, the king hurried to the Chamber of Displeasure where he found Kaikeyi, whom he cherished more than life itself, supine on the ground, like an *apsara* fallen from heaven,

like a torn creeper, an ensnared fawn. The infatuated monarch caressed his wife whose eyes were as large as lotus petals, and asked:

*“Devi, you cannot be angry with me.
Tell me, who has hurt you?
Who has shown you disrespect?
Beloved, why are you lying in the dust?
So long as I am here,
Why must you look like one possessed?
I have doctors eager to please me—
They will attend on you.
Tell me what is wrong, dearest.
Do you want someone rewarded?
Do you want anyone punished?
Kaikeyi, my shy and lovely one,
Tell me everything.
I will dispel your sorrow
As the morning sun scatters mist.”*

To the king, pierced by the arrows of the god of love and a slave of passion, Kaikeyi replied bluntly, “No one has insulted me, my lord. No one has shown me disrespect. It’s simply that I want you to do something for me. Promise first that you will not refuse, and I will tell you.”

With loving hands the maharaja smoothed her hair; he smiled and said softly, “You know I love no one more than you, except Rama. An hour without Rama makes me restless. In the name of Rama, therefore, tell me. In the name of Rama, whom I love more than I do myself and my other sons, I ask you to tell me. I swear I will do what you want. I swear by all the good deeds I have done that I will do what pleases you.”

Eagerly and joyfully, realising that the time was ripe, Kaikeyi spoke her terrible words—as terrible as Death waiting on one’s doorstep:

*“Bear witness, O thirtythree gods!
O twelve Adityas, bear witness!
Bear witness, eleven Rudras!*

*Eight Vasus and twin Ashvinis,
 Bear witness!
 Sun and Moon and Sky and the planets,
 Night and day, and the four quarters,
 The universe, bear witness!
 Gandharvas and rakshasas,
 Night-spirits, spirits of the ancestors,
 House deities, all creatures everywhere,
 Bear witness!
 My illustrious lord, wise in dharma,
 Follower of truth, has agreed
 To honour my desire."*

"Do you remember, my lord," continued Kaikeyi, "the battle between the gods and the anti-gods, when you were wounded and left for dead? Do you remember how I ministered to you, keeping awake all night in order to save your life? Remember the two boons you promised me then? I will claim those two boons today, my lord. First, in place of Rama, install Bharata regent. Second, exile Rama for fourteen years of penance in the forest. You are a raja of rajas. You know that word given should be word kept."

Kaikeyi's ultimatum bewildered and distressed the maharaja. *Is this a day-dream?* he thought. *What is happening? Have I lost my senses? Am I recalling something from my past birth? Is my mind diseased?*

He felt like a deer who suddenly confronts a tigress. He sat down heavily on the ground, like a venomous snake petrified in a mandala by mantras.

He murmured faintly, "Aho! It's shameful!"

But even in his agony, anger flamed up inside him, and he said to Kaikeyi:

*"Vicious woman,
 Must you destroy our dynasty?
 What have Rama and I done to you
 That you should behave like this?
 Rama loves you as his own mother—
 Why are you bent on harming him?
 No, I will not do it!*

*Rama is my son, my very dear son,
 I cannot live without Rama.
 I can abandon Kaushalya and Sumitra,
 But not Rama. Never!
 Has Rama ever spoken a single harsh word?
 How can I banish him then?
 Rama has shown dharma, truth, forgiveness,
 Gratitude, compassion, duty, gentleness.
 I am an old man, Kaikeyi,
 I do not have long to live;
 I beg of you, don't ask me to do this.
 Have pity.
 Take all the wealth of the sea-circled earth,
 I will gladly give it to you.
 But not this.
 For this is like death to me.
 O Kaikeyi, with palms joined in anjali I ask,
 I touch your feet with my head.
 Save Rama!
 Save me from doing adharma."*

Fierce Kaikeyi replied even more fiercely, "Dharma, your majesty? You dare to talk of dharma, yet you refuse to keep your word? When holy men question you, what will you say—'Kaikeyi saved my life, but I broke my promise to her.' Remember the legend of the hawk and the dove?—and how King Shivi kept his word and saved the dove by slicing off pieces of his own flesh from his body? Dharma or adharma, you have given your word. You cannot go back on what you have promised. How can you even think of enjoying yourself with Kaushalya after playing false with me? I swear to you, by Bharata and by my own life, nothing but the exile of Rama will satisfy me."

Like a madman, a sick man, a hypnotized snake, a root-severed tree, Dasharatha groaned, "Who has pushed this horror in your head? You are possessed. You were not like this earlier. How was I to know that when I made love to you I was fondling a cobra in the darkness? I was a foolish child playing with a snake. What will people think of me! What will they say!—'There goes Dasharatha, who lusted for his wife so much that he sent his dearly beloved son

into exile.' ”

Dasharatha added:

*“Shame on all women!
They are wicked by nature,
Perverse, selfish creatures!
—No!
I do not mean all women,
I mean only the mother of Bharata.
What you demand is immoral.
I will not grant it!
Shout!
Scream!
Take poison!
Dive into the bowls of the earth!
Do what you like—
You are vicious,
You are a disgrace to your father.
Threaten all you like—
I will not honour you!”*

He tottered and collapsed like a frail creature in front of the woman who had ensnared his heart. He saw her feet in front of him; but he was unable to touch them.

Maharaja Dasharatha sprawled shamelessly on the ground, like King Yayati fallen from heaven after the exhaustion of his good karma. Cruel Kaikeyi remained obdurate. “You have always, Maharaja,” she said, “described yourself as a truth-speaker, a man of your word. What makes you break your word now?”

*In the meantime the sun
Set behind the Asta hills.
Starry night and the moon-mandala
Appeared.
But not for the pain-filled monarch,
Wailing in darkness like a sick man,
Staring blankly at the sky.
“O Night lovely with stars,
Do not shine on me,*

Do not turn into dawn, lovely Night!
Let me not see Kaikeyi any more!
I offer you anjali, Night.
Save me from that ruthless woman."
He begged Kaikeyi:
"Lovely-limbed lady,
Help me,
Be kind to me,
Be gentle to me,
Be gracious, Kaikeyi.
I do not have long to live.
Have pity on me,
On Rama, on our citizens, our gurus,
On Bharata too.
Listen to me, lovely-eyed one!"
His eyes were copper-red with weeping,
His grief was pitiful.
She turned her face away.

Night passed slowly.
He heard the chanting of the bards at dawn.
He ordered them to be silent.

Kaikeyi looked at the scion of Ikshvaku
Ignominiously spread-eagled on the floor.
"Why, what is wrong?" she asked.
"Was it sinful to grant me a boon?
Haven't the wise in dharma declared,
'Truth is the highest dharma'?
King Shivi gave his flesh to the hawk.
King Alarka plucked his eyes out
And gave them to the learned Brahmin.
Truth is Brahma,
Truth is one,
Truth is the root of Dharma,
Truth is the Vedas,
Truth is the ultimate Goal,
Abide by Truth if you seek Dharma.
Grant me my boon!"

Dasharatha looked at her; he writhed, like a bullock struggling to escape its yoke, and blurted out:

*“Wicked woman,
I spurn you!
I spurn the hand I clasped
In front of the sacred fire!
I spurn you as a wife,
I spurn your son!”*

In the meantime, consoling night departed, taking her moon-and-stars garland with her. It was now early morning. Kaikeyi, who had a way with words, said to her husband:

*“Why this agitation, sire?
Why these venomous words?
Summon your son Rama quietly.
Having done so, do your duty
And announce my son prince regent.”*

Smarting like a pedigreed horse lashed by a whip, Raja Dasharatha replied:

*“I am trapped in the bond of dharma.
My conscience is stilled.
I wish to see my son,
My favourite, my dear son Rama,
Rama who abides by dharma.”*

Later that morning, the king's chief counsellor, Sumantra entered the royal bed-chamber, extolling the virtues of the Raghu dynasty. He paused behind the door and chanted:

*“May Shiva and Kubera grant you victory!
May Varuna, Agni, and Indra!
Holy night has passed,
Auspicious day is here.
Awake, O tiger among kings!*

*The Brahmins and generals and merchants are here.
Awake, my lord!"*

Recognising Sumantra by his manner of chanting mantras, Raja Dasharatha said, "I summoned Rama here. Why has my order not been carried out? I am not asleep. Bring Rama here immediately."

Sumantra hurried to Rama, who shone like the sun. He did *anjali* and said, "Noble Rama, revered son of Kaushalya, your father and Queen Kaikeyi desire to see you urgently."

Dark-eyed Sita, beloved of Rama, saw her husband to the gate, silently invoking good fortune on him:

*"The king will soon install you regent.
May Indra protect you in the east,
May Yama protect you in the south,
May Varuna protect you in the west,
May Kubera protect you in the north."*

Rama from a distance saw his father seated on a luxurious couch, with Kaikeyi beside him; Dasharatha looked dejected and haggard.

He touched his father's feet and then Kaikeyi's, honouring them with complete composure. Dasharatha mumbled inaudibly, "Rama"; then tears filled his eyes, and he could neither see nor speak.

Distressed by his father's behaviour, Rama shuddered, as one does when stepping accidentally on a snake. His father was wan, heavy with grief, labouring under some life-sucking fear; he was like a normally unruffled ocean agitated by a tempest, like the sun in eclipse, like a sage who has spoken a lie. It was unbelievable. Rama's heart also heaved in sympathy like the ocean at full moon.

He thought: *What makes my father so dispirited? Even when angry, he was always delighted to see me come. What is so unusual today?*

Turning to Kaikeyi, he asked, "My father loves me—I know it—why then has my arrival made him so depressed? Have I unknowingly offended him in any way? Why is he silent?"

Kaikeyi bluntly replied to mahatma Rama, "The raja is not angry. He is not depressed. There is something in his mind he

does not dare tell you. He loves you, he does not want to displease you. A long time ago he gave me two boons. He now regrets them. Any man would. He promised me, 'I will give you anything you ask.' Now he is not so sure. He's like a man who builds a dam too late—after the river has run dry.

Listen to me, Rama:

The root of Dharma is Truth.

Let him not abandon Truth.

Act honourably, Rama.

Whether it pleases or displeases you,

I will tell you all.

I must, for he will not."

Rama, deeply hurt, said, "Devi, it is shameful that you could even think that I would not be obedient to my father. Do not say these words to me! What is the king's desire? Tell me. I will do it. I give you my word. Rama does not have to repeat what he promises. Once is enough."

Kaikeyi said, "I have asked the raja to install Bharata regent today, and banish you. After renouncing the throne, you will be in the forest fourteen years in the garb of an ascetic, with matted locks and tree-bark dress."

Rama heard Kaikeyi, and remained calm. But Raja Dasharatha shook with grief.

Rama listened to Kaikeyi's death-like words and said serenely, "So let it be. I will honour the promise of my father. I will go into forest exile, matted-haired and dressed in tree-bark. I will do anything for my guru, for my father, for my friend, and for a person to whom I'm indebted. Only one thing hurts me—why did my father not tell me himself about Bharata's installation? I would gladly have given Sita, the kingdom, my life and my possessions to my brother Bharata. Why is my father weeping? Comfort him. I have accepted his command and I go gladly into exile in the Dandaka forest."

Kaikeyi, delighted, pressed Rama to depart immediately.

"It is agreed then," she exclaimed. "Send messengers to bring Bharata here from the house of his maternal uncle. As for you, Rama, I would advise speed. Leave this instant for the forest.

Ignore the king's silence; he is perplexed and paralysed. Do not mind if he does not speak. Until you leave, your father cannot bathe or eat. That is a condition."

The raja sighed deeply.

"O the shame! The pain!" Dasharatha moaned, and fell in a faint on the gold-carved couch.

Rama raised him up, and said gently to bitter-tongued Kaikeyi, "Devi, I do not hanker for worldly benefits. Like the *rishis*, I seek dharma. I will lay down my life to do what is pleasing to my father. You did not have to consult my father. You have greater power over me—a word from you would have been enough. I will go now and take leave of my mother Kaushalya; then, after getting Sita's consent, I will enter into forest-exile. Help Bharata to rule the kingdom well."

Rama did *pradakshina* around the sacred articles assembled for his installation and left, without once looking back.

Kaushalya Devi had passed the night observing religious rituals, and was engaged in offering puja to Vishnu for the welfare of her son. She was wearing silk, and peacefully worshipping Agni by chanting mantras.

Rama entered the beautiful puja room and saw his mother praying before the sacred fire. He saw the ritual oblations for the gods lying in front of her: curds, unhusked rice, *ghee*, sweets, white flowers, milk boiled with rice and sugar, sesame seeds, sanctified firewood, and vessels of consecrated rice. He saw his fair-complexioned mother offering lustral water to the Deity.

He said, "Devi, a calamity has struck Sita, Lakshmana, and you. What I am going to say will pain you. No, do not offer me this luxurious cushion to sit on. I am going to the Dandaka forest, where I will sit on a *kusha*-grass mat. The king is installing Bharata regent, and exiling me for fourteen years."

Kaushalya trembled like a plantain tree. Rama steadied her.

"O Rama my son," she said, "would that I had been barren, I would not have felt this sorrow then. The barren woman has only one grief—she is childless—that is all—she has no other regret. I never knew physical pleasure with my husband. My happiness lay in your happiness, my son. And I hoped, and I waited. And now—"

what will my younger co-wives say, what unkind words will I not hear in the inner apartments! Better I were dead than this!"

Seeing Kaushalya grieving, Lakshmana said to her, "It is not pleasing to me either, noble lady, that Rama should be ordered into exile."

Turning to Rama, he said, "The people still know nothing of this. Take my help. Overthrow the king and rule in his place. Our father is now our enemy. Capture him, kill him if necessary. If a guru or a father forgets the difference between what should be done and what should not be done, he should be disobeyed. Devi, witness my valour. Rama, witness it too. I will kill this senile father who lusts after Kaikeyi. He is beneath contempt."

Kaushalya listened to noble-minded Lakshmana and said tearfully to Rama, "You hear what Lakshmana says, my son? If you think it right, do it! Do not obey the command of my co-wife and abandon me to grief. You who know dharma, do not forsake me! You who wish to follow dharma, what dharma can be greater than that?"

Stable in dharma, Rama answered his weeping mother with words of dharma, "I cannot disobey the command of my father. I bow my head to you, mother, and I ask your leave to go to the forest. Remember the sage named Kandu who killed a cow? He knew it was adharma, but his father had ordered him, and he did it. Remember the sons of Sagara? Sixty thousand of them slaughtered while tunnelling the earth! Their father ordered it, and they obliged. All of them—and others too—were like gods, and they obeyed their fathers without question. I will do the same. I am not alone, mother. I am following the precedents of dharma established in the past."

To Lakshmana, Rama said, "Nothing is higher in this world than dharma: and truth is the root of dharma. Take shelter in dharma. Be a good Kshatriya. Give up mindless violence."

Then, with head bowed low and palms folded in *anjali*, to Kaushalya, "Grant me leave, mother. I promise you that I shall return after my father's terms are fulfilled."

Consoling his mother, firmly restraining his younger brother, determined to accept exile to the Dandaka, Rama respectfully circumambulated Kaushalya and left.

But Lakshmana pondered the matter deeply, and swung from extremes of dejection to extremes of approval. He frowned, he swayed his hands like an elephant's trunk, he shook his head right and left; he looked at Rama from the corner of his eye and said:

*"You've chosen the wrong time, brother,
To reject the path of adharma
Simply because you fear the people's censure.
You are a Kshatriya, are you not?
Does a Kshatriya extol fate's inevitability?—
It's useless, cowardly, pitiful.
I'm surprised you don't distrust the two of them.
Don't you know cheats put on masks of dharma?
There is still hope.
Trust in me.
My sword is not a toy,
My arrows are not firewood.
They are meant to rout my enemies.
Take over the throne—I am on your side.
Command me as you would a slave."*

Rama pacified Lakshmana and said, "Listen, young brother, my mind is firm. I will obey my father. That is the path of truth."

Rama's mother tried to persuade her firm-in-dharma son to take her with him. "My dear son, what will I do here? Let me follow you, like a cow following her calf, wherever you go."

"Tricked by Kaikeyi, and deserted by you," Rama replied, "the king will die. It is wrong for a wife to leave her husband. She must not even think of it. This is the eternal Dharma. A husband must be looked after by his wife as long as he lives."

Kaushalya listened. Her face was wet with tears. She spoke with maternal affection, "I will not be able to live with my co-wives. Is there no way to take me with you? I will follow you like a wild gazelle."

Rama replied:

*"For a married woman, as long as she lives,
Her husband is her god,
Her husband is her lord."*

*No matter how noble, no matter how religious,
If a woman fails to serve her husband,
She sins.*

*Even if she fails to worship the gods,
But faithfully serves her husband,
She attains the highest heaven.
A wife's duty is to please her husband,
To obey him and no one else.
Such is a wife's dharma—
So say shruti and smriti,
The revealed and remembered traditions.
Be with my father, mother;
Wait for me. I shall return.'*

Rama's mother sprinkled sacred water and chanted blessings for his welfare:

*"O rare Raghu! I cannot stop you.
Go then. And return soon.
After you return,
My happiness will be restored.
May the dharma you have cherished
protect you!
May the gods you have worshipped in temples
protect you!
May the weapons you received from Vishvamitra
defend you!
May the Vedas and the sacred kusha-grass
protect you!
May temples, and hills, and trees, and bushes,
And lakes, and birds, and lions, and reptiles
protect you!
May heaven and air, and sky and wind,
May the animate and inanimate,
Day and night, morning and evening twilights
protect you!
Be happy, Rama, my son.
My blessings go with you."*

She smelt his head and embraced him, "Go in peace, my son. I shall wait for you in Ayodhya."

He touched her feet.

She kept looking at him.

Glowing with the radiance of a mother's blessings, he went to Sita's apartments.

"Sita," Rama said, "my father has exiled me to the forest. You come from a noble lineage, you know dharma, you have always followed the path of dharma. I must go. Stay back, my dearest, *priya*, and obey the king my father. Listen to Bharata and observe the sacred rituals. Lovely one, I have no choice but to go. Take my advice and see that you do nothing that offends anyone in any way."

Sweet-speaking Sita replied softly to her husband, "Rama, most excellent of men, my husband, what words are these that make me more ashamed than amused? How can a brave son of a king say what you have said? It's disgraceful, it's unspeakable. Father, mother, brother, son and daughter-in-law have their individual existences; but a wife's destiny follows the destiny of her husband. I have no choice either but to go with you to the forest. I am a woman. I have no refuge in father, mother, son, friends; I have no refuge in myself; my husband is my only refuge, in this life and in the next. I am determined.

I will go with you.

I will eat after you have eaten.

I will live on roots, shoots, and fruits.

I will not displease you.

I will walk ahead of you.

I will gaze at the hills, lakes, and rivers.

I will be secure in your care.

I will enjoy swans and lotus-filled ponds.

I will not tire, my large-eyed lord,

No, not for a hundred thousand years.

I do not want heaven

If that heaven does not have you in it.

I love you, and only you,

I will die without you."

Dharma-knowing Sita said this to dharma-loving Rama, who had no intention of exposing her to the perils of forest-exile.

He said, "Sita, do what I tell you. The forest is full of dangers. Please do not insist. Think it over carefully. A forest is not the place for you."

But Sita let agitation overcome good sense and, speaking from stubbornness born of affection, retorted accusingly:

*"Rama, you are no better than a woman!
My father Janaka made a mistake
In making you his son-in-law.
The citizens of Ayodhya are stupid indeed
To say, 'Rama shines like the sun:
The dazzle of his glory is unequalled.'
Will you expose me, your chaste wife,
Married to you before my puberty,
To the stares of others?—You will not dare!
I refuse!
To be with you is heaven,
To be without you is hell.
This is the truth, Rama,
So take me with you.
If you do not,
I will take poison and die."*

Crystal-clear tears rolled down her cheeks like water drops off two lotuses. Her face, spotless like the moon, paled, like a plucked lotus.

Rama took her in his arms and tried to reassure her with these consoling words:

*"Devi, how can I be happy
If I make you unhappy?
Heaven is not worth having
If you are unhappy.
As for fear, my wife—I know no fear,
I am as free from fear as Self-Born Brahma."*

*I am not afraid to take you with me.
 I did not know your mind in the matter.
 I can no more abandon you
 Than a wise man can abandon compassion.
 Come with me to the forest, lovely wife
 With thighs as shapely as an elephant's trunk.
 I will abide by dharma
 And you will abide with me.
 Since your mind is made up,
 My mind is made up too.
 Distribute your jewels among Brahmins,
 And food among the needy.
 Hurry!
 Donate my dresses and clothes,
 My couches and chariots and other luxuries
 To servants and dependants."*

Lakshmana heard the conversation between Rama and Sita. His face was wet with tears. He bowed at his brother's feet, and held on to them tightly.

"Since you are determined to enter the deer-and-elephant-haunted forest," he said, "take me with you. I will lead, bow in hand. I will gather roots and fruits for you. You and Sita will discover delight in the hills, and I will attend to your daily needs. When you are sleeping or awake, I will guard you."

Rama replied happily, "Come then, Lakshmana. But first say farewell to your friends and kinsmen."

After donating their possessions to Brahmins, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana went to their father Dasharatha.

Crowds watched them pass from seven-storeyed buildings. The hearts of the citizens were filled with sorrow at the sight of the three.

Lotus-eyed, dark-blue-skinned Rama said to his suffering father:

*"I have come to take leave, father.
 You are the maharaja:
 Be gracious and bless us.
 Allow Sita and Lakshmana to accompany me—
 They will not have it otherwise."*

*I have tried,
But they are firm."*

Bound by his word to Kaikeyi, Raja Dasharatha replied in anguish:

*"Go, my child.
May your sojourn be happy and safe.
You are wedded to truth and dharma:
You will not settle for less.
I swear to you, my son:
I was tricked by Kaikeyi—
She cloaked her sinister plan
As fire hidden under ashes.
And it is you who have to suffer!
It is no surprise to me, though,
That eldest son agrees to redeem his father's honour."*

Raja Dasharatha embraced his son, and fell on the ground in a faint. The queens—all except Kaikeyi—raised a loud lamentation in the palace.

Rama refused an escort, saying, "When I have renounced everything, why do I need an armed escort? What will I do with trappings when I have given away the elephant? All I need is a dress of tree-bark such as ascetics wear in the forest—and a spade and a basket—and that will suffice for my fourteen years' exile."

Shameless Kaikeyi herself procured the tree-bark dress and offered it to Rama in the midst of the entire assembly, saying, "Wear this."

Rama accepted the two pieces—a loin-covering and a body-garment—and removed his costly robes. Lakshmana also discarded his expensive dress, and put on the ascetic garb.

Sita, who was dressed in silk, exclaimed in startled tones, "How do ascetics put these on?" She accepted the *kusha*-grass garment from Kaikeyi and her eyes filled with tears.

She tried repeatedly to fasten the ascetic garment and failed. She draped one end round her neck and another over her waist; it slipped. Rama quickly stepped forward and helped her drape the garment over her elegant silk robe.

Kaushalya embraced her daughter-in-law Sita and affectionately smelt her head. She said:

*"In times of misfortune,
Women are known to desert even loving husbands.
Such women the world calls wicked.
They forget past favours:
Ingratitude is the root of their selfishness.
Nothing binds them—
Not family ties, not solicitude,
Not learning, not gifts, not even marriage.
But others there are, rooted in truth:
Who are gentle, prudent, obedient,
Who honour their husbands above all.
Do not despise my son for his exile—
Let him rather be like a god to you."*

Sita did *anjali* before her mother-in-law, and accepted the advice rich in dharma and commonsense. "I will do as you say. I know my duty to my husband. Do not speak of me and faithless women in the same breath. Dharma is to me as moonlight to the moon. There is no *vina* without strings, no chariot without wheels, and there is no future for a wife without a husband, even though she have a thousand sons. My husband is a god to me. How can I ever despise a god?"

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita did *anjali* to Raja Dasharatha and respectfully circumambulated him. Cheerfully Sita climbed into the chariot: she looked radiant in that sun-dazzling vehicle.

Confusion and tumult in the city of Ayodhya—throngs of bewildered men and beasts—elephants trumpeting while rutting juice streamed down their temples—horses whinnying—an incredible cacophony! The entire populace clamouring after Rama, like a parched man running after water. . .

Kaushalya stumbled after the chariot, like a cow seeking a newborn calf tied to a stake. Rama kept looking at his mother as she swayed in and out of the teeming crowd, sighing, "Rama, Rama! Hai Sita! Lakshmana!"

Raja Dasharatha shouted, "Stop!"

Rama cried, "Forward!"

The charioteer Sumantra, puzzled, did not know what to do.

Rama said, "When the king scolds you, say, 'I could not hear you, sire.' "

One of the ministers of Dasharatha advised, "If one wishes a person to return, one should not accompany him too far."

Rama travelled till he came to the enchanting banks of the Tamasa river. He journeyed all night, covering a large distance. He performed his ritual devotions at the morning twilight, and hurried on, though it appeared to him that the splendid horses were moving far too slowly.

He crossed the sacred waters of the Vedashruti, and reached the territory in the south where Agastya lived.

Next he crossed the Gomati river, whose cool waters fed by glaciers rippled to the ocean. After the Gomati, he came to the Syandika river whose banks were poignant with the cries of peacocks and swans.

Entering the vast and enchanting territory of the Kosalas, Rama paused. He turned and, facing Ayodhya, with palms joined in *anjali* he addressed his capital:

*"Farewell, lovely city,
protected by Dasharatha!
Farewell, gods of Ayodhya,
guardians of the city!
I will see you again
when I meet my parents
After fulfilling the promise
made by my father."*

After Kosala, Rama came to a smiling and prosperous land redolent with gardens of bewitching beauty.

*Here he saw
The three-worlds-flowing Ganga,
Weedless, cool-waved Ganga loved by sages,
Ashram-sprouting Ganga
In whose transparent waters apsaras sported,*

*Ganga of gods, gandharvas, and anti-gods,
 Ganga meandering through heaven,
 River of celestial lotuses,
 Holy river, holy river, holy river,
 Roaring, reverberating river,
 River smiling with teeth of white foam,
 Freely-flowing river faring forward,
 River curving like a girl's plaited hair,
 River of wayward whirlpools and placid places,
 Noisy river, river of agitated waters,
 Holy Ganga where gods bathe,
 River replete with white lotuses,
 Sweet with the cries of swans and cranes
 And the plangent call of the chakravakas,
 Tree-garlanded river,
 Lotus-carpeted river,
 Lily-lambent river,
 River covered with pink pollen dust
 Like a flushed love-lorn beloved,
 Pearl-pure Ganga,
 Sin-cleansing river.*

The raja of this territory was Guha, a friend of Rama, a Nishada by birth. No sooner had he heard of the arrival of Rama in his kingdom than he marched out to greet him.

He embraced Rama and said, "My kingdom is Shringaverapura, it is as much yours as mine. Treat it like a second Ayodhya. I am honoured to welcome an illustrious guest."

Rama returned Guha's embrace. "I am happy to see you and your family so well. I am grateful for your invitation and sorry I cannot accept it. I have taken a vow to dress in tree-bark and deer-skin, and subsist on roots and fruits. All I need now is fodder for the horses; no more. They are Raja Dasharatha's favourites. It will please me to see them properly fed."

Guha ordered his followers: "See that the horses are provided plentiful forage and water instantly!"

Night departed; dawn came. Broad-chested Rama said to *shubha-lakshana*, auspicious-marked Lakshmana:

*"It's sunrise.
Gracious night has gone.
The black kokila sings, my brother,
I can hear the scream of the peacocks.
It's time for us to cross the Ganga,
Swift-flowing daughter of Jahnui."*

The ruler of the Nishadas summoned his people and ordered, "Get a strong boat ready, with oars and a helmsman, to ferry Rama across the Ganga."

Rama said to Guha, "You have been very kind to me." To Lakshmana he said, "Let us board now."

They boarded the boat, taking their bows, quivers and swords.

The charioteer Sumantra approached dharma-knowing Rama and asked, palms joined in *anjali*, "What shall I do?"

Rama touched Sumantra with his right hand. "Return to Raja Dasharatha. Serve him faithfully. You have been of great help to us. We do not need the chariot now. We will proceed to the forest on foot."

Turning to Guha, Rama explained, "It is not right for me to stay in your territory's forest, which is inhabited. I must live in a secluded ashram and practise *tapasya*. Bring me the milky sap of the banyan."

With the banyan sap Rama dressed his and Lakshmana's hair into matted locks, as ascetics do. Then he said to Guha, "It is difficult to rule a kingdom. Be vigilant. Keep your army, your forts, and your people in eternal readiness."

The two brothers killed four deer—a *varaha*, a *rishya*, a *prishata*, a *maharuru*. They sliced off the flesh suitable for eating after consecration, in order to feed themselves. They slept that night under a large tree.

Next morning, at the pure hour of sunrise, they journeyed to the confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganga. There, in a dense forest, they saw enchanting scenery, indescribably beautiful, unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Rama gazed at the flowering trees and said to Lakshmana, "Not far from Prayaga, where the Yamuna and Ganga meet, I can see puffs of billowing smoke, which means there is some hermit's dwelling close by. I can hear the thunderous music of two river-

waters blending. And here are logs of wood chopped by woodcutters . . . There must be an ashram very near."

They came to the ashram of *rishi* Bharadvaja, who advised Rama, "Go to Chitrakuta, which is sixty miles from here, and rich in honey, roots, and fruits. Wander with Sita in the hilly region of Chitrakuta, listening to the peacocks calling, and let the prolific rivers and cascading waterfalls enchant your eyes. You will be captivated. The call of the kokilas there will ravish your heart."

Passing the night in Prayaga, the two princes took leave of the *maharishi* and proceeded towards Chitrakuta.

Midstream, in a raft on the Kalindi river, Sita paid respects to the river deity, "Devi, goddess, ferry us to safety on the other bank!"

After crossing the Kalindi, they took raft across the dancing-waved, tree-necklaced Yamuna: on its other bank was a giant, cool-leaved banyan, called Shyama.

Sita did *namaste* to the sacred tree: "I bow to you, great banyan! May my husband complete his vow! May we see Kausalya and Sumitra again!"

Seeing Sita praying, Rama said to Lakshmana, "Proceed ahead with Sita. I will follow with my weapons. Present Sita whatever fruit or flower she admires. Make her mind happy."

*Every time she saw a tree, shrub, or creeper,
She questioned Rama.
And Lakshmana would run
And bring her flowers, branch-loads of them.
The cries of the swans and the cranes,
The smooth sand on the shores of the river,
Delighted the heart of Sita.*

After travelling a few miles, they killed a deer. Rama consecrated the flesh and dressed it. Reaching flat ground, they rested under a tree, recalling their pleasant time in the peacock-and-monkey-and-elephant-haunted forest.

Arriving next day in Chitrakuta, Rama said, "This is where we will stay. Mahatma sages live here."

They entered the ashram of Valmiki.

Dharma-knowing Valmiki received them, saying, "You are welcome. Stay as long as you please."

Rama said to Lakshmana, "Let us construct a fine wooden hut here. It is a lovely place."

In the enchantment of Valmiki's ashram in Chitrakuta near the Mandakini river, where birds chirruped and deer scampered, Rama stayed and forgot the pain of his banishment from Ayodhya.

Raja Dasharatha recovered consciousness and questioned his charioteer Sumantra about Rama.

"I have done wrong," said Dasharatha.

"I came under Kaikeyi's spell,

Ill-born and ill-minded woman!

I rejected the advice of elders,

Counsellors, friends, merchants.

She obsessed me.

What else could it be, Sumantra?

Is it all destiny?

Did Providence wish it to be so?"

Six days after the departure of Rama, Dasharatha said to Kaushalya at midnight:

"Gracious queen,

A man reaps what he sows—

Good deeds, sweet fruit;

Ill deeds, bitterness.

Only the absolute fool does deeds

Without thinking of their consequences.

A man who cuts down a mango grove

And waters palasha flowers instead

Will repent his deed at harvest time.

By banishing Rama,

I cut down a mango grove.

When I was young, once

I hunted along the Sarayu river.

I heard the plop of a pitcher.

*I aimed at the sound,
Thinking it was an elephant.
I fired a snake-sharp arrow.
A human voice screamed 'Hail! Hail!
Who wants to harm a poor hermit?'
On the banks of the Sarayu
Lay a blood-drenched boy.
'You have killed not only me,
You have killed my old parents,' he said,
'For they are feeble and helpless.
Go, confess your crime to them.
No, do not fear: I am not a Brahmin.
My father is Vaishya, my mother Shudra.'
I plucked out the arrow.
He looked at me, and died.
I was afraid, but I went.
'You have returned, my son?' asked the father.
'Hurry, come inside the ashram.
Give me water to drink.'
I replied as bravely as I could:
'I am not your son, O mahatma.
I am a Kshatriya,
My name is Dasharatha.
I have killed your son by mistake.
Before he died, he told me you were both blind.
Tell me, how will I expiate my crime?'
He replied:
'If you had not confessed,
Your punishment would have been heinous.
Take us to our son.'
They wept over the boy's corpse.
They offered the funeral water libations.
Immediately Indra descended,
And the boy's spirit ascended to heaven
In a celestial chariot.
His father said:
'Now kill me too, sir.
You have made me sonless.
I put this curse on you—*

*You made me suffer on account of my son,
 You too will suffer on account of yours.'*
*He and his wife climbed the funeral pyre
 And ascended to heaven.*
*Kaushalya, my dear queen,
 I reap today the fruits of my crime.*
*I am dying, my wife,
 I am dying of a broken heart.*
*I feel my senses ebbing away
 Like the flame of an oil-less lamp.*
*I feel remorse devouring my strength
 Like a river eroding its banks.*
*Hai strong-armed Rama!
 Have you really gone away?
 Have you gone, your father's beloved son?
 Hai Kaushalya!
 Hai Sumitra!
 Hai Kaikeyi, ruin of my race!''*

With these words, at midnight, in the presence of Kaushalya and Sumitra, grieving over the exile he ordered of his beloved son, Dasharatha died.

The city of Ayodhya was plunged into gloom.

Next morning the Brahmins of Ayodhya's court met in conclave to decide on the succession.

"This night has been a hundred-year night," they concluded.
 "The king is in heaven; Rama in exile, and with him Lakshmana;
 Bharata and Shatrughna are in the beautiful Rajagriha, their
 mother's city.

Raja-less, a country is doomed.
Raja-less, grain remains unharvested.
Raja-less, sons disobey fathers,
Raja-less, lawlessness prevails.
Raja-less, lovers break vows.
Raja-less, rewards are refused.
Raja-less, charity is forgotten.

Raja-less, religious debates decline.
Raja-less, ownership disappears.
Raja-less, man exploits man.
Like rivers without forests,
Like cattle without a cowherd,
Is a kingdom without a king.
The eye strives for the good of the body,
The king strives for the good of the kingdom.
The king is truth,
The king is dharma.
Let us install another king,
Let us make young Bharata our new king."

Vasishtha listened to the outcome of the deliberations, and advised his friends, Brahmins, and the royal ministers: "Illustrious Bharata is passing his days comfortably with his maternal uncle; his brother Shatrughna is with him. Order messengers on swift horses to bring the two brothers here. This should be done at once."

The night the messengers rode into the city, Bharata had a troubling dream. Recalling it in the morning, he was upset. His friends tried to divert his gloom with jokes, stories, singing, dancing, and acting. Bharata was not amused. A close friend of his asked, "What is wrong? Why don't you join us for some fun?"

Bharata replied:

"I had a nightmare.
I saw my father dishevelled and dejected
Fall from a mountain peak
Into a pit of cowdung.
He floundered in filth,
Sipping slime in his cupped palms,
Screaming hysterically.
Smeared with slime, head dunked in dung,
He gobbled rice cooked in sesame oil.
I saw in my nightmare
 the ocean drying up
 the moon falling on earth
 darkness engulfing the world . . .
I saw a furious fire

suddenly extinguished
I saw the tusks of the king's elephant
crumble into powder
I saw the earth
split in two
I saw leaves wither
mountains explode . . .
I saw the king in black
hunched on an iron stool
I saw him molested
by dark-brown girls . . .
I saw the dharmatma king
with red garlands
with sandalpaste on his body
rushing south in a chariot
pulled by asses . . .
I saw a red woman
a horrendous rakshasi
play-acting
as if dragging the king . . .
Horrible! Horrible!
Either I, or Rama, or the king, or Lakshmana
will die . . .
My throat is choking.
My mind is whirling.
I see no reason to fear,
Yet I am cold with fear.
My voice quivers.
My face is discoloured.
I feel ashamed.
I do not know why.
The more I recall the details of my dream,
The more I am filled with a weird foreboding."

Even as Bharata was recounting his nightmare, the messengers from Ayodhya galloped on exhausted horses into Rajagriha. Kaikeyi's son Bharata heard the summons, and prepared to leave. The words of the messengers, mixed with the image of his dream, revived fresh turbulence in his heart.

Tears came to his eyes as his chariot drove towards Ayodhya. Failing to find his father in the palace, Bharata hurried to his mother's apartments. Kaikeyi saw her son, and jumped up from her golden couch, happily welcoming him.

He touched her feet. She smelt his head, embraced him, seated him on her lap, and asked, "How many nights have you been away from your maternal grandfather's home, my son? You must be very tired. Is your grandfather well?—and your maternal uncle Yuddhajit? How is he? Tell me about them."

"Seven nights, mother," replied Bharata. "They are all well. The messengers came, and I hurried back. Tell me, mother, where is father? I do not see him anywhere. He is not with you either, as he usually is. He must be with Kaushalya then."

Kaikeyi said, making the displeasing fact as pleasing as she could, "The mahatma raja your father has gone the way all mortals must go, sooner or later."

Innocent Bharata, crushed with grief, muttered, "*Hai*, I am finished," and, lifting his arms, he fell on the ground.

Recovering his senses, he asked his mother, "Where is dharmatma Rama? Where are his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita?"

As if supplying an agreeable piece of news, Kaikeyi said, "Rama, dressed in tree-bark, has gone to the Dandaka forest. Sita and Lakshmana have gone with him."

Troubled, Bharata wondered what dishonour Rama had brought on his family to deserve forest-exile. "But what did Rama do?" he asked. "Did he steal a Brahmin's possessions? Did he kill an innocent man? Did he commit adultery? Why is my illustrious brother Rama banished to the Dandaka forest?"

Questioned by noble-minded Bharata, Kaikeyi (being, after all, a woman) disclosed everything. The whimsical woman was foolish enough to think herself as clever as a pandit.

"No," she said,

"Rama has not stolen from a Brahmin.

He has not harmed anyone, poor or rich.

He has not lusted for another's wife.

It is all my doing.

He was being installed regent,

So I forced his exile,

*And demanded you be installed instead.
 Unable to live without Rama,
 The king died of a broken heart.
 Listen, my dharma-knowing son:
 Accept the throne of Ayodhya today!
 No regrets!
 Be firm!
 Listen to the Brahmins led by Vasishtha.
 Perform the king's funeral rites,
 And be crowned the lord of the world."*

Shaking with inconsolable grief, Bharata replied:

*"What will I do with a throne,
 With a father dead, and a father-like brother
 Lost to me?
 You have killed the king
 And exiled my brother—
 You have piled horror upon horror,
 You have poured poison in an open wound!
 You have come like death
 To ruin my family.
 When my father married you,
 He thrust a flaming torch in his chest!
 O that I had the strength of yoga
 To refuse you,
 Or intelligence enough to thwart you!
 How could you be so vicious, mother?
 It is the age-old tradition in our family—
 The eldest son inherits the throne,
 His brothers must obey him.
 You know nothing of the dharma of rajas,
 You know nothing of our royal tradition."*

Accusing his mother, Bharata continued with mounting anger:

*"Go, Kaikeyi, vicious woman!
 You have violated dharma!
 Weep!*

Weep for me!
Take me as dead! .
My father dead,
Rama banished,
My name tarnished—
It is all your doing.
You a mother?
You are my bitterest enemy.
You are not the daughter of dharma-raja Ashvapati—
You are a rakshasi born to ruin us!
I will go to the forest too,
And bring Rama back.
And you—punish yourself—
Leap into fire—go into Dandaka exile—
Hang yourself—throttle yourself.
Sinful woman, you have no choice!”

Like an arrow-pierced snake, sighing deeply, he fell; he lay on the ground like the multi-coloured flag of Indra toppled from its tall pole.

After a long time, he recovered and reproached his mother in front of the entire assembly of ministers:

“I have no desire to rule.
I do not want the throne.
My mother’s wishes are not my wishes.
I did not know Rama was going to be regent.
I was away in a distant land.
Shatrughna was with me.
I have nothing to do with the exile
Of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana.”

Recognising the voice of Bharata, Kaushalya said to Sumitra: “It is noble-minded Bharata. Bring him to me.”

Bharata embraced grieving Kaushalya. She said to him, “You envied my son Rama. Enjoy the kingdom; it is now yours. Your mother Kaikeyi has crookedly arranged everything.”

Bharata replied gently to Kaushalya, whose mind was filled with blinding sorrow:

*"You are wrong, noble lady.
 I am innocent.
 You know how much I love Rama.
 May the sin of killing a king,
 A woman, a child, or an old person,
 Fall on the head of whoever plotted Rama's exile!
 May the schemer of his exile
 Become addicted to wine, women, and gambling!
 May he be shunned by men of dharma!
 May he die childless!
 His be the sin of a man who sleeps
 With the wife of his guru!
 His be the sin of the arsonist
 And the traitorous friend!
 May he spurn his wife when she approaches him
 After the end of her period!
 His be the sin of one who refuses water
 To a thirsting man!
 His be the sin of the unfair arbitrator!"*

Kaushalya shuddered as Bharata, saying this, choked and fell at her feet. She said, "Your fierce curses increase my torment, my son. But now I know that you have not swerved from the path of dharma. You are a man of truth."

She lifted Bharata up and, placing his head in her lap, caressed him.

While Bharata was planning a journey to meet Rama, Lakshmana's younger brother Shatrughna said to him, "Rama who cared so deeply for the welfare of others has been sent into exile by the wiles of a woman. What happened to Lakshmana? Why was he powerless to help Rama?"

He had hardly finished when Manthara, the hunchback maid appeared at the door. She was smeared with scented sandalpaste, loaded with jewellery, and wearing an expensively embroidered dress. She looked like a monkey entangled in colourful chains and ribbons.

The doorkeeper seized her and dragged her before Shatrughna,

saying, "This is the wicked witch who sent Rama into exile; she is responsible for the death of your father. Punish her as you see fit!"

Infuriated, Shatrughna shouted in front of the palace inmates, "Watch how I deal with this foul-minded wretch!"

He gripped her hard, and slapped her violently. She staggered. He hit her with redoubled fury. Her friends fled helter-skelter, screaming, "He will kill us all! Let us run to the lady of dharma, Kaushalya. She will save us."

Manthara's jewels clattered on the floor; the palace glittered like an autumn sky spangled with star-gems.

Shatrughna was about to beat the hunchback again when Bharata stopped him.

Bharata said:

*"Control yourself, Shatrughna!
She is a woman.
Forgive her.
No man must harm a woman.
I would have killed Kaikeyi myself
Except that I knew dharma-knowing Rama
Would never have forgiven me.
If Rama hears that you have killed Manthara,
He will never speak to you or to me."*

At this, Shatrughna released the hunchback maid; she limped inside and fell at Kaikeyi's feet, sobbing and half-senseless.

On the fourteenth day the royal counsellors said to Bharata, "Rama has been banished to the forest with Lakshmana. Our guru and lord, Dasharatha, has gone to heaven. Accept the throne before some enemy decides to launch a surprise attack. The people are expectant. All preparations have been made. Only your consent is needed. Finest of men, Bharata, become our sovereign!"

Bharata did *pradakshina* around the objects of coronation; after the respectful circumambulation he said, "You are learned counselors. You are aware of the tradition in our family—the eldest son has always inherited the throne. Rama is my elder, Rama will be

ruler. I will retire to the forest for fourteen years. Get ready a powerful army with its fourfold divisions. I have determined to go to the forest to persuade my elder brother to return."

The massive army was summoned. Bharata rose early next morning and, climbing into his dazzling chariot, sped forward to persuade Rama.

The creatures of the forest, seeing the army marching, fled; herds of deer and antelope, afraid of the chariots, horses, elephants and foot-soldiers, clambered up the hills and scurried along the river banks.

Bharata said to Vasishtha, "This must be the place indicated by Bharadvaja. I can see Chitrakuta, the Mandakini river and, far away, like a huge blue cloud, the forest."

He ordered his soldiers to camp, and set out in the direction of a column of smoke, faintly visible in the distance.

Rama was showing Sita the river that meandered at the foot of the mountain; he offered her a piece of meat, saying, "This is delicious, superbly roasted; try it." Even as dharmatma Rama said this, there was a tremendous noise, and he heard the trumpeting of elephants running amok at the approach of Bharata's army.

He turned to Lakshmana. "Find out the cause, Lakshmana. It seems to me it's some king out hunting in the forest."

Meanwhile Bharata, who had gone ahead, came to the spot. He saw Rama sitting inside a hut, dressed in deer-skin, his hair a mandala of matted locks. Rama shone with an indescribable radiance; he had the neck and shoulders of a lion, he was mighty-armed, his eyes were like lotuses; he was seated like a Lord of Dharma on a cushion of *kusha* grass; beside him were Sita and Lakshmana.

Perspiration wet Bharata's lotus-like face. He fell down at Rama's feet, wanting to touch them, but unable to, so confused was he in the gush of fraternal feeling.

"O noble prince!" he cried out.

He could not speak any more.

Shatrughna fell at Rama's feet, weeping. Rama embraced them both. Rama's eyes filled with tears.

Rama smelt Bharata's head, held his two hands, and asked gently:

"Dear brother,

*Why are you here?
 Where is father? Why have you left him alone?
 It is so long since I last saw you.
 Tell me all:
 Is the kingdom prospering?
 Are the women honoured and protected?
 Are disputes impartially judged?
 Are gurus, elders, gods and ascetics respected?
 Are the fourteen weaknesses of a king avoided?—
 Atheism, hypocrisy, anger, procrastination, laziness,
 Slavery to the senses, contempt for good advice, lack of vigilance,
 Weakness for ill counsel, impractical project-making,
 Inability to keep a secret, fondness for foolish friends,
 Omission of auspicious rituals, and failure to fight foes?
 Are you aware of the three ends of life—
 Dharma, Artha, Kama?
 The three kinds of power—
 Energy, authority, intelligence?
 The six strategies to overcome enemies—
 Direct war, surprise attack, calculated wait,
 Espionage, powerful allies, and bribery?
 Do you avoid the eight kinds of friends—
 The deceitful, the reckless, the violent, the envious,
 The gossip, the foul-mouthed, the property-stealer, the unjust?
 Do you avoid dealing with the twenty types of kings—
 The child monarch, the senile, the frail and ill, the overthrown,
 The aggressive, the cowardly, the greedy, the sycophant,
 The despised by his counsellors, the voluptuary, the frivolous,
 The atheist, the ill-fated, the fatalistic, the famine-stricken,
 The defeated in battle, the frequently foreign-travelling,
 The many-enemied, the always-in-need, the opposed-to-dharma?
 You must tell me all, Bharata.
 What brings you here in deer-skin and matted hair?
 Why have you left the kingdom?"*

Bharata joined his palms in *anjali* and replied to noble-minded Rama, "Our father did what he was coerced to do; he has left us and gone to heaven, tortured to death by separation from his son. My mother Kaikeyi, to her great shame, has done all this. She is

doomed to a terrible hell for her crime. I have come here to ask you a favour. Give us your consent to accept the crown. You cannot ignore all our supplications, noble brother."

"Do you really expect me, Bharata," replied Rama, "to do this sinful deed for the sake of a mere crown? I am nobly born, I believe in goodness and keeping one's word. And you should not condemn your mother. Elders are free to order their children. Surely you are aware of this."

Rama turned to Sita and said, "Your father-in-law is dead, Sita. You, Lakshmana, are fatherless. Bharata has brought us the sad news."

Rama noticed the affliction of Bharata; serenely he consoled Bharata with these words:

*"Man is not entirely free:
Fate drives him here and there.
What progresses, declines,
What rises, falls,
Union ends in separation,
Life ends in death.
Ripe fruit fears fall,
Born man fears death.
Solid pillars decay, the house collapses,
Man totters into old age and death.
Night gone does not return,
The Yamuna's waters merge in the abundant ocean.
Like sunrays sucking a pool dry,
Days and nights suck life empty.
Weep for yourself, then—
Why weep for another?
Whether you are here, or elsewhere,
Time passes,
Death walks with us, and sits with us.
Travel abroad, Death goes with you.
When you return, Death returns too.
Wrinkles form, hair turns grey—
What can man do?
The sun rises, and man rejoices;
The sun sets, and he rejoices;*

*Little realising he's died a little.
 A new season arrives, and he's happy,
 As if it is the first season ever;
 Each new season is that much less of life.
 Like floating pieces of driftwood,
 Husband and wife, parents and property meet briefly,
 And drift apart.
 Who can escape destiny?
 Why mourn the dead when you are dying too?
 A man standing on a road
 Sees a group of travellers pass—
 'Wait!' he shouts. 'I'm coming too.'
 We all follow the path of our fathers and forefathers.
 Why mourn them?
 It is everyone's road, everyone's journey,
 The same road, the same journey.
 A river cannot return to its source,
 There is no turning back in life.
 Only a going ahead—only acts
 That should bring happiness and peace.
 For is it not true that happiness and peace
 Are everyone's goal? —that to be human is
 To seek what is happy and peaceful?
 No, Bharata, I cannot accept the crown.
 I will follow the path of dharma:
 I will obey the will of my father.
 This is how a man of dharma should act:
 He should obey his guru,
 He must be true to himself,
 He must keep word."*

These were the words of dharma-knowing Rama designed to console sorrowing Bharata. A wise Brahmin, Jabali, also heard them, and said to Rama:

*"Excellent advice, Rama.
 But your intelligence and tapasya
 Seem to have slightly failed you here.
 Who is a friend?"*

*Who is a father?
 No one gains anything from anyone.
 We are born alone,
 And we die alone.
 We say, 'She is my mother,
 He is my father,' and it's foolish—
 No one is related to anyone!
 Like a traveller, spending one night in a village,
 Then moving to another, spends another night there,
 Leaving his first resting place,
 So are they all, father, mother, home, wealth,
 Casual resting places. . .
 No point getting too attached to them.
 You cannot renounce your royal duties, Rama,
 You cannot live in a forest!
 Come to Ayodhya, and rule there!
 Dasharatha is nothing to you,
 You are nothing to Dasharatha.
 He was not you,
 You are not him.
 It is time to do your royal duty.
 What's a father?
 Sperm fertilizes ovum, that is all—
 Propitious time and womb are all that's needed.
 Remember, noble prince,
 There is only one world—this!
 Be within-sense practical,
 Give up beyond-sense idealism.
 The wise have deliberated,
 Bharata has implored you,
 Be reasonable and accept the crown!"*

Rama listened carefully, and convincingly rebutted Jabali's advice:

*"I know you wish to please me.
 It looks agreeable, but your advice
 Is totally unacceptable—
 It goes against all moral principles.*

*What will people say
 If, under the garb of dharma,
 I practise adharma?
 Will anyone honour me, respect me, emulate me?
 No, Truth is my stand,
 And Truth I shall follow.
 Truth is the eternal way for the raja,
 Truth is the soul of a kingdom,
 Truth holds the world together.
 Why should I reject the command of my father,
 Who was a lover of Truth,
 Who lived by Truth?
 Not ambition, not greed, not ignorance
 Will make me depart from Truth.
 There is no greater virtue
 Than being true to one's word.
 I am sorry my father employed you:
 You are an atheist, bent on deception.
 As a thief, so a Buddhist—
 Both unbelievers, both deserving punishment."*

Jabali replied to mahatma Rama, "I was playing a role. I am not an atheist. I spoke like an unbeliever in the hope that you might be persuaded."

Vasishtha noticed that Rama was angry, and he placated Rama by saying, "Jabali knows all about the lives of creatures in this world and in the next. He was only trying to get you to return. Protector of the world, let me give you an account of the creation of worlds.

*In the beginning was water.
 From water evolved earth.
 Then came Self-Born Brahma and the gods.
 Brahma as Boar lifted the earth
 And, with his mind-born sons, made all phenomena.
 From Akasha-Space came Brahma,
 From Brahma came Marichi,
 Marichi's son was Kashyapa,
 Kashyapa's son was Vaivasvat,*

*Vaivasvat's son Manu, the first Prajapati,
 Manu's son was Ikshvaku.
 The first raja of Ayodhya. . .
 And so on until
 Nahusha, whose son was Nabhaga;
 Nabhaga's two sons were Aja and Suvrata,
 And Aja's son was Dasharatha.
 You are Dasharatha's eldest son Rama.
 So long as the eldest son lives,
 The younger cannot be crowned.
 This is the tradition of the Ikshvakus.
 You cannot break it.
 Accept the kingdom, and become our sovereign!
 Rama, a man's moral guides from birth
 Are guru, father, and mother.
 A father gives life,
 A guru gives wisdom,
 So a guru is superior.
 I have been your father's guru.
 Listen to me, and obey me."*

But Rama replied firmly:

*"No son can return to his parents
 What they lavish on him from birth.
 My father, Raja Dasharatha, has commanded me.
 I cannot disobey my father."*

Bharata stood up and, touching water, said:

*"Listen to me!
 Listen, everyone present here!
 One of us must remain here
 If my father's command is to be honoured.
 Let it be me—
 I will spend fourteen years in the forest."*

Turning to Rama, who shone with the dazzle of the sun and the moon, Bharata said:

*"Remove your gold-painted sandals, my brother.
I ask you this
To ensure peace and safety for all."*

Rama took off his sandals and gave them to Bharata. Bharata did *pranama* before the sandals.

"For fourteen years, I shall live here," Bharata said to Rama. "I will subsist on roots, shoots, and fruits, I shall wear deer-skin and matted locks. I will stay outside Ayodhya, ruling the kingdom in your name, with your sandals as symbols of your authority. I will wait for you. If you do not return after fourteen years, I will immolate myself."

"I shall return," said Rama, embracing Bharata.

Turning to Shatrughna, he said, "In my name and in Sita's name, I adjure you to look after your mother Kaikeyi, and never to be angry with her."

Rama bid farewell to all, and entered his hut.

Bharata, helped by his ministers, ruled the kingdom from Nandigram. He lived as a hermit, in tree-bark dress and matted locks.

He placed Rama's sandals on the consecrated dais, covered them with a royal canopy, and personally fanned them with yak-tail *chowries*. He administered government in the name of Rama, submitting every business of state first before the sandals, and every gift as well.

Rama entered the forest of exile with Sita and Lakshmana like the sun entering a massive conglomeration of dark clouds.



BOOK THREE

Aranya-Kanda

THE FOREST

*Rama entered the dense forest.
He saw a mandala of ashrams;
Spread on the ground, everywhere,
Kusha grass and tree-bark garments . . .
Ashrams where hermits dazzled
Like the sun-mandala itself . . .
Ashrams spacious and clean,
Havens of peace
Echoing with bird-song,
Deer-delighting ashrams
Where apsaras danced . . .
Sacred fires burning,
Consecrated utensils,
Ashrams abundant in fruits and delicious roots,
Surrounded by towering trees
Laden with luscious fruits,
Melodious with the chanting
Of hymns from the Vedas . . .*

*Rama unstrung his bow and entered.
The hermits of the mandala of ashrams,
Pleased, rose to greet him,
Marvelling at his majestic appearance
And dignified gait, impressed
By Lakshmana's grandeur, and Sita's beauty.*

The dharma-knowing dwellers of the ashram joined their palms in *anjali*, offered their guests flowers, fruits and roots, and said, "Scion of Raghu, a raja protects his subjects. Protect us as a mother protects the child in her womb."

Accepting their hospitality, Rama passed the night in the ashram. At sunrise he, Lakshmana, and Sita entered the heart of the forest, filled with deer, boars, and tigers.

*Trampled trees,
Crushed creepers,
Uprooted bushes,
Muddied pools,
No birds singing,*

Only the chirp of crickets . . .

*Rama plunged ahead,
Followed by Lakshmana
And timid Sita.*

*Suddenly he saw
A hill-huge creature,
A weird monster,
A hideous beast
With sunken eyes,
Fearful, clad in
Bloodstained tiger-skin,
Wide-jawed, horrendous
Like the god of death,
Roaring and screaming . . .
From his spear dangled
Heads of three lions,
Four tigers, two wolves,
Ten spotted deer,
And a tusked elephant
Dripping with blood . . .*

*Seeing Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita,
He charged headlong
Like killer Kala,
Devourer of the worlds
On the day of doom . . .
With an earth-shaking yell,
He scooped up Sita
And, standing afar, declared:*

*"I am a rakshasa,
My name is Viradha,
This is my forest.
I am armed, I crunch
The flesh of hermits.
This lovely lady
I will make my wife.
As for you, wicked trespassers,
I will drink your blood."*

Janaka's daughter Sita

*Heard the rakshasa,
And trembled like a plantain tree
In a fierce storm.*

*The hideous voice again
Filled the forest:
"Who are you?
Why are you here?"*

*"Two Kshatriyas," replied Rama,
"Passing through the forest.
Why do you obstruct us?"*

*"I am Viradha,
My father is Java,
My mother Shatahrada.
Through the grace of Brahma,
My tapasya was fruitful.
He gave me a boon
That makes me invulnerable
To any earthly weapon.
You cannot kill me!
Leave!
Leave now!
Or die at my hands!
Leave the lovely lady
And run!"*

*Rama replied,
Eyes red with anger:
"You are evil.
You are courting death.
Fight then!
See who survives!"*

*Swiftly, Rama fired
Seven gold-feathered arrows;
They pierced Viradha
And embedded in the earth,*

Dripping blood.

*The two brothers rained
Glittering arrows
On the rakshasa Viradha,
Who was Kala,
Who was the Day of Doom,
Who was Death itself.
He laughed,
He opened wide his jaws,
He swallowed the arrows,
He laughed again.
He stooped,
He picked up Rama and Lakshmana,
He swung them on his shoulders
And, roaring, strode
Towards the dark forest.
Rama said to Lakshmana:
“Let him, Lakshmana.
Humour him.
He is going our way.”*

*Sita, seeing the brothers carried away,
Shouted:
“Excellent rakshasa, take me!
Leave them alone!”*

*Instantly, Rama decided
To kill the rakshasa.
Lakshmana snapped his left arm,
Rama his right.
That cloud-mass of rakshasa,
Arms broken,
Toppled like a hill hit by lightning.*

*The brothers jumped on him,
Pummelled him,
Lifted him, hurled him back on the ground,
Kicked him,*

*But failed to kill him.
 Noticing his invulnerability,
 Saviour-of-all Rama
 Said to Lakshmana:
 "He has a boon
 By the strength of his tapasya.
 No weapons can harm him.
 Dig a pit, Lakshmana,
 Quickly,
 Large enough for an elephant."
 Saying which, Rama waited,
 His foot on the rakshasa's neck.*

*Hearing Rama's command,
 The rakshasa cringed:
 "O tiger among men!
 O Indra-strong mortal,
 I am dying.
 I did know who you were.
 You are Kaushalya's son,
 You are Rama.
 And this is gracious Sita,
 And this is famous Lakshmana.
 I am no rakshasa,
 I am the gandharva Tumburu.
 I lusted for the apsara Rambha,
 So Raja Kubera cursed me,
 'When Rama kills you,
 You will revert to gandharva-hood.'
 I am grateful, O foe-crusher,
 You have redeemed me,
 My curse is over."*

*Lakshmana dug a large pit.
 The rakshasa shrieked.
 They rolled the conch-eared monster
 Into the gaping hole.*

Rama went to Sita,

And embraced and consoled her.

*Sita said gently and lovingly:
“Even a noble man
Can subtly slip into adharma:
With passions controlled, however,
There is less chance.
Kama is of three kinds, my husband:
One leads to lying;
The other two are worse:
Lusting for another’s wife,
And needless cruelty.
You have never—you never will—
Speak a lie, my lord.
You cannot lust for another’s wife,
It is so destructive of dharma;
You never did, you never will.
You cannot even think it, Rama,
You love your own wife so deeply.
You are firm in Dharma,
You are rooted in Truth.
My husband, my darshan-gracious lord,
The third kind of passion
Has taken hold of you—
Needless cruelty, senseless enmity.
Brave husband,
You have vowed to kill the rakshasas
In order to protect the sages.
Armed with bows and arrows,
You and your brother Lakshmana
Scour the Dandaka forest . . .
I see you stride ahead,
But my mind is uneasy,
I worry for your welfare.
I do not like it—
I do not like your mission in Dandaka.
I will tell you why.
Listen to me, my husband.
You are armed with bows and arrows,*

*You enter the forest,
You see innocent creatures straying,
Won't you be tempted to shoot?
A bow is to warrior
As faggot is to fire.
A long time ago,
In a bird-and-deer-filled forest,
At a holy place,
There lived an ascetic.
To frustrate his tapasya,
Indra, disguised as a warrior,
Entered the forest, sword in hand.
He left the sword in trust
With the meditating ascetic—
Which the pious man accepted,
Always keeping a watchful eye on the sword
Wherever he wandered in the forest.
He was so conscientious
He took the sword with him
Even when gathering roots and fruits.
Till it so happened
That he decided to abandon his tapasya,
For his mind was always on the sword.
Slowly,
Unknowingly,
He slipped into adharma,
He found pleasure in violence,
He descended into the hell that is cruelty.
And all because of the sword,
Because of his association with the sword.
To be always with weapons
Is to be always near fire.
I love you, my husband,
So I say this.
You are always armed.
I beg of you,
Do not kill the rakshasas
Of Dandaka forest indiscriminately.
The world will never forgive such slaughter.*

*From Dharma comes success,
From Dharma comes happiness,
Dharma brings everything,
Dharma is the world's essence.
The wise discipline and control themselves,
They discard pleasure,
Pleasure is not the way to Dharma.*

*But why should I say all this?
I am only a woman,
I cannot be very serious.
Who am I to teach you Dharma?
If you find it reasonable,
Give it a little thought, my husband,
And do as you think best.
There is no time to lose."*

*Rama, firm in Dharma,
Heard the advice of his devoted wife
And said:
"Daughter of Janaka,
Lady learned in Dharma,
Devi,
Because you love me
You have offered advice
That will lead to my welfare.
It is natural for you to do so.
Devi,
What can I say?
You yourself said that Kshatriyas carry arms
To succour the distressed.
I have vowed to protect
The holy sages of Dandaka forest.
I cannot go back on my vow.
I am firm in truth.
I will give up my life,
I will give you up, Sita,
I will give up Lakshmana,
But I will not break a promise*

*I have made to Brahmins.
 I would have protected the sages
 Even if I had not taken a vow—
 Now even more so.
 You have made me happy, Sita:
 Only a person who loves a person
 Advises that person.
 Your words suit you,
 They suit your family too, lovely lady.
 You are my sa-dharma-charini,
 My companion in dharma,
 I love you more than life itself."*

*Mahatma Rama, wielder of the bow,
 Said this, and proceeded to Panchavati.*

On his way to Panchavati, Rama came across a giant, extraordinarily powerful vulture.

Rama and Lakshmana both thought him to be a rakshasa; they asked, "Who are you?"

Gently and sweetly, the bird replied, "Child, I am a friend of your father." He continued, "I am Aruna's son. My lineage goes back to the primal world-creators, the Prajapatis. My name is Jatayu. Dear child, if you so wish, I will stay near you. When you and Lakshmana are away, I will keep watch over Sita."

Rama was delighted to hear of Jatayu's friendship with his father Dasharatha. He bowed to Jatayu and embraced him warmly.

Accepting Jatayu's offer to guard Sita, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana proceeded to Panchavati. Jatayu accompanied them.

Reaching Panchavati, home of wild beasts and free-ranging deer, Rama said to his radiantly illustrious brother Lakshmana:

"We are in Panchavati, which the sage recommended for our stay. What a treasure of flowering trees! Look around, resourceful brother, and find a spot suitable for our ashram. There should be a pool nearby—water and greenery together create ideal beauty—and flowers and firewood and kusha grass easily available. That will be

perfect for Sita, you, and I.”

In Sita's presence, palms joined in *anjali*, Lakshmana replied, “No, let the selection be by you. If you were to live here another hundred years, I would still leave the choice of the site to you. You choose, and I will build the hut.”

Pleased by Lakshmana's reply, Rama indicated an advantageous site and, taking Lakshmana's hand in his, he said, “The land here is level; it has an unobstructed view, and is ringed by flowering bushes. Construct the ashram here. There's a lake nearby, replete with sun-like lotuses, delicately scented. And blue lotuses as well! Not far off is the Godavari river with flowering trees bordering its banks, with swans and *chakravakas* and waterfowl and herds of deer. And the caves of nearby hills echo with the cries of peacocks. What hills!—shining with gold, silver and copper minerals, they look like huge elephants with multi-coloured lattice-worked caparisons. A lovely spot, this . . . ”

One day, after bathing in the Godavari, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana returned to the ashram. They finished their morning devotions and entered the leaf thatched hut. Rama was conversing with his wife and brother when a rakshasi happened to pass by.

She was Ravana's sister;

Her name Shurpanakha.

She saw Rama inside.

He looked like a god to her.

His face glowed.

He had strong-muscled arms.

His eyes were lotus petals.

He walked with the grandeur of an elephant.

His hair was matted.

He had all the marks of royalty.

He had a blue-lotus skin,

He was as handsome as the god of love,

As glorious as Indra.

She fell in love with him,

Rama possessed her.

He was well-proportioned, she hideous;

His waist was slim, hers bulging;

He had black hair, hers was copper-red;

*His voice was soothing, hers grating;
He was young-looking, she haggard;
He well-mannered, she repellent;
He amiable, she hostile.*

Love-lorn, she said to Rama, "Who are you, in hermit dress, carrying bow and arrows? Why are you here in the land of the rakshasas?"

Rama, unsuspecting, told her everything. "I am Raja Dasharatha's eldest son. My name is Rama. This is my brother Lakshmana, this is my wife Sita, daughter of the king of Videha. I come here in obedience to the will of my father to carry out the dictates of dharma. Who are you? Who is your father? Whose wife are you? You must be a rakshasi able to change form at will. You look lovely. Why have you come here?"

The love-stricken rakshasi replied, "Listen to me, Rama. I will tell you the truth. I am Shurpanakha, I am a rakshasi, I can change form at will. I live in this forest, I terrorise its creatures. I have a brother, Ravana. You have surely heard of him. I have a second brother, Kumbhakarna, who sleeps all the time. And a third, Vibhishana, who is a man of dharma. Two more brothers, Khara and Dushana, are skilled warriors. But I am greater than they. Ever since I saw you, Rama Purushottama, finest of men, I have desired you as my husband. I am strong; I can travel as I please, where I will. Be my husband. What good is Sita? She is deformed, she is ugly, she is not worthy of you. I am your ideal partner. Make me your wife. I'll devour this silly, flat-bellied female—and I'll finish off your brother too. Then you and I will sport on the peaks of ravishing mountains and make love in the forest of Dandaka."

She looked at him with love-intoxicated eyes. Rama smiled and replied to Shurpanakha who was bound in the noose of kama:

*"I am a married man.
Here is my beloved wife.
You could never tolerate a co-wife.
But consider Lakshmana now—
He's my younger brother,
He's good to look at, has fine manners,*

*He's young and in every way likeable,
His wife is not with him,
He probably needs feminine company,
He'll make a good husband for you.
Large-eyed and graceful-hipped lady,
Why don't you marry him,
And enjoy him exclusively
As sunlight enjoys Mount Meru?"*

Captivated by kama, the rakshasi ignored Rama and turned to Lakshmana, "I am soft-skinned, I am shapely. Come, make me your wife. We will lovingly wander in the forest of Dandaka."

Skilful-in-speech Lakshmana smiled and said:

*"My wife? Lotus-skinned lady,
I'm just an attendant—
Why become the wife of a slave?
I depend on my brother.
Large-eyed lady, take my advice,
Marry my elder brother—
He's the one with wealth and all else.
He'll cast off his flat-bellied, slovenly, aging wife,
He'll gladly go for you.
What a soft smooth skin you have,
What absolutely enchanting limbs.
How could any man ignore you
And settle for a mere mortal female?"*

The large-waisted, simple-minded rakshasi took Lakshmana's banter seriously. Captive of kama, she said to Rama who was sitting with Sita inside the leaf-thatched hut, "So this is the decrepit, deformed and dissolute flat-bellied wife you find so attractive? I'll gobble her up in your very presence! Rid of my rival, I'll roam the woods with you."

The flaming-ember-eyed rakshasi leapt upon fawn-eyed Sita, like a giant meteor hurtling at the planet Rohini.

Rama stopped her as she pounced, like death's noose on Sita. He reprimanded Lakshmana, "You should not joke with wicked and vicious creatures. Sita is in danger! Do something, quickly! Maim



this big-bellied female monster.”

Powerful Lakshmana pulled out his sword and, as Rama watched, sliced off the ears and nose of Shurpanakha.

With a horrifying scream, dripping blood, Shurpanakha fled into the forest, arms uplifted, howling in agony.

She rushed to her mighty brother Khara who was chief of a horde of rakshasas in Janasthana. She threw herself at the ground in front of him, like a bolt of lightning falling from the sky.

Frightened, faint from loss of blood which smeared her face and body, Khara's sister panted out details about Rama's arrival in the forest with Sita and Lakshmana, and how they had mutilated her.

Khara looked at his disfigured, bleeding sister writhing on the ground, and said, “Stand up! Collect yourself and tell me clearly what happened. Who disfigured you? Who has dared to touch a black venomous snake with the tip of his finger? Doesn't he realise he's swallowed poison by doing so? Doesn't he realise he's placed the noose of killer Kala round his neck? There isn't a god, gandharva, mahatma, rishi, or any other being with power to harm you. There is no one except Indra who dare offend me. I'll exterminate the wretch today! My arrows will suck his blood dry, as swans suck out milk from water. Calm your mind, my sister, and tell me: who is this criminal fool who has dared to assault you?”

Trembling with anger, and weeping, Shurpanakha replied, “Two handsome young men—eyes large like lotuses—dressed in deerskin—living on roots and fruits—brahmacharis—practising *tapasya*—two brothers—Rama and Lakshmana—sons of Dasharatha—as good-looking as the gandharva raja—gods or anti-gods, I don't know—a young girl too—slim-waisted—very pretty—glittering ornaments—she's the one responsible—I was insulted because of her—treated like a harlot—I'll drink her blood—I'll drink their blood . . . ”

Khara summoned fourteen rakshasas, all immensely powerful and fierce as death; blazing with anger, he said, “Two armed youths in black deerskin have trespassed into Dandaka along with a girl. Get rid of them. Get rid of her too. My sister wants to drink their blood. This is her dearest desire, rakshasas! Hurry, kill them! She will come with you for the repast.”

Accompanied by Shurpanakha, the fourteen rakshasas sped on

their mission, like clouds driven by a storm.

Outside Rama's ashram, Shurpanakha pointed out the two brothers and Sita to the rakshasas. They saw hugely powerful Rama sitting with Sita in the leaf-thatched hut, with Lakshmana standing guard respectfully.

Seeing the rakshasas and Shurpanakha approaching, illustrious Rama said to brave Lakshmana, "Wait here with Sita, Lakshmana. Let me deal with the rakshasas she has brought along this time."

Dharmatma Rama stretched his gold-carved bow and shouted:

*"We are Rama and Lakshmana,
Sons of Dasharatha,
We have come with Sita
To inaccessible Dandaka.
We eat roots and fruits,
We practise tapasya,
We are brahmacharis.
Why do you disturb us?
I am here on request
From sages seeking protection
From your atrocities.
Stay where you are!
Not one step further!
If you value your lives, I warn you, night-prowlers,
Turn back."*

The fourteen rakshasas brandished their spears. They glared with blood-shot eyes at the man who challenged their presence with such cool courage. "Our noble master Khara," they retorted, "is angry with you. We are ordered to kill you. We will do exactly that. How can you fight so many of us? Our maces and spears and darts will crush you. Your bow will be shattered in your hands, you will die."

The fourteen rakshasas let loose their weaponry at Rama, who countered by splintering their spears with gold-feathered arrows. Aiming again, he fired his arrows at the chests of the rakshasas. The arrows whizzed through the air, pierced the rakshasas' breasts and plunged in the earth on the other side like snakes slithering inside an ant-heap.

The rakshasas toppled like trees with chopped trunks.

They lay inert on the ground, drenched in blood, hideously mutilated.

Shurpanakha, shaking with anger and fear, rushed back to Khara. Her blood had partly congealed like tree sap, and she fell again, a sticky mess, in front of her brother, screaming for revenge.

Khara said furiously, "What has happened now? Didn't I send a host of flesh-eating warriors to help you?"

She wiped her tears and replied, "You comforted me when I first came to you, with my nose and ears sliced off. You ordered fourteen rakshasas to kill cruel Rama and Lakshmana. Instead he has killed them all. They are dead and I am afraid. He will kill you too, for he is a brave man, Rama is, the son of Dasharatha, the man who had me mutilated, and so is Lakshmana."

Khara summoned his general Dushana and said, "Assemble fourteen thousand rakshasas for battle. I need super-skilled warriors, aggressive, never-retreating, powerful as thunder clouds, cruel and insatiable soldiers delighting in blood-lust. Get my chariot ready for battle too. Arm it with bows, arrows, swords, spears, and the sharpest darts. I will personally lead these warriors to exterminate proud Rama."

Khara shouted at his charioteer to plunge into battle. He roared like a storm cloud about to unleash a torrent of hail. He stood in his chariot, the very personification of doom.

*Inauspicious omens appeared.
From a greyish-yellow cloud
Shaped like a donkey
Gushed a stream of blood.
Khara's chariot horses tripped
And fell, helplessly sprawling
On the flower-lined highway'
A red-ringed chakra
Obscured the sun's disc.
A vulture perched on the flagpole.
Thunderclouds like wounded elephants
Rained rivers of blood,
Blotting the entire sky.
A horripilating darkness descended.
Evening twilight arrived abnormally early,*

*The sky was painted blood red,
Weird beasts and screaming birds
Obstructed Khara's chariot,
Jackals, vultures, and hyenas exulted.*

Khara stood in his chariot, horripilating. His left arm throbbed, involuntarily, spasmodically; his voice grew faint; a mysterious film clouded his vision; his forehead ached. But he laughed, undaunted.

"Others may think these dreadful omens," he said, "but I am strong! I can shoot the stars down from the sky with my arrows. I can kill Indra himself when he comes charging on his elephant Airavata. Who are these two puny mortals to frighten me?"

Screaming his war cry, Khara attacked Rama. His rakshasas released a volley of missiles, among them spears, clubs, darts, and a thousand arrows.

Rama received the onslaught calmly, absorbing the weapons as the ocean absorbs the rushing waters of innumerable rivers, as a towering mountain absorbs lightning bolts. He stood firm, even as blood gushed from his wounds, like the evening sun surrounded by red-flecked clouds.

With supreme ease, as if it was all a game, he released a counter-volley of sharp gold-tipped arrows that streaked into the horde of rakshasas like the multiple noose of death. Slicing clean through their bodies, they flew on, bright with blood, like fiery torches.

The rest of the rakshasas redoubled their attack. Rama shouted his war cry, fitted a celestial Gandharva arrow—a thousand missiles seemed to whistle out of his bow as he fired it. This thick missile shower shrouded the sun.

Thousands of rakshasas toppled dead. Their corpses lay in heaps, a slaughter-house of hacked, disembowelled and mangled flesh.

Khara said to himself: *My army is wiped out. Rama has single-handed killed them all, including my general Dushana.*

Undeterred, he shot blood-sucking arrows called *narachas* at Rama; they sped like venomous snakes. He manoeuvred his chariot like a moth circling a flame and fired seven more arrows, each as deadly as Indra's thunderbolt; they shattered Rama's sun-bright armour.

Rama, covered with blood, countered with six arrows. One struck Khara's head; two wounded his arms; the others, crescent in shape, battered his chest. Thirteen more stone-sharpened arrows—one each sliced the chariot shafts of Khara; four killed the horses; the seventh pierced the charioteer's neck; four more immobilised the axles; the twelfth sliced Khara's bow; the thirteenth, dazzling like lightning, hit Khara in the chest, temporarily paralysing him.

His horses killed, his charioteer knocked out of the vehicle, his bow shattered, Khara jumped off his chariot and waited, brandishing his mace.

Circling Rama, he crouched; then, burning with hatred, he hurled his gold-embossed weapon. The radiant mace whirled and flew like a thunderbolt, searing the trees and bushes, speeding towards Rama. Rama's arrows collided with it in mid-air; it twisted and fell on the ground; it lay there like a she-snake immobilised by drugs and mantras.

Rama, who loved dharma, smiled though still angry, and said, "Is that all, rakshasa? So much noisy boasting, such poor performance! You are going to die now. Your body will soon lie and embrace the earth, like a lover clutching hard the girl he has long desired."

Khara stepped back.

Rama chose a shining arrow, looking like the punishing rod of Brahma. *Dharmatma* Rama aimed the arrow at Khara, and fired; like lightning it penetrated Khara's chest; his chest burst into flames; he fell down, dead.

*Like Andhaka felled by Shiva
in the Shveta forest,
Like Vritra slain by Indra
in celestial combat,
Like Namuchi the anti-god
killed by sea-foam,
Like Bala brought low by Indra,
so Khara fell.*

The rakshasa Akampana hurried to Lanka with the news and announced to Ravana, "Sire, the rakshasas of Janasthana have

been slaughtered. Khara has died on the battlefield. I was one of the lucky ones, I escaped."

Ravana's eyes flamed with anger:

*"Who is this man
Who harms my people
And seeks his own death?
Who can save him now—
Not Indra, not Kubera,
Not Yama, not Vishnu.
Who dares make me angry?
I am the death of Death,
I am the Kala of Kala,
I can consume fire,
I can outspeed wind,
I can burn the sun."*

Akampana replied, "It is Dasharatha's son. His name is Rama. His brother Lakshmana is with him."

Ravana shouted, "I will go to Janasthana, I will kill Rama and Lakshmana!"

"Sire," said Akampana, "Rama is unbelievably strong.

*He dams a river with arrows,
He hurls down stars and planets,
He raises the drowned earth,
He subdues the wayward wind,
He destroys the worlds that are
And creates a new universe.
Gods and anti-gods cannot harm him.
There's only one way to kill him,
And that I will now tell you.*

*His wife is slim-waisted Sita,
The loveliest lady in the world.
She is young, she is voluptuous,
A jewel-adorned jewel.
No apsara equals her.
Lure Rama into the forest,*

*And abduct Sita
Without her,
Rama is as good as dead."*

Pleased, strong-armed Ravana reflected for a while; then he said, "You are right. Tomorrow I shall set out in my chariot and bring Sita here."

Next day Ravana drove his chariot to the ashram of Tataka's son Maricha. A seat was offered to him; he was honoured and served special food meant to be chewed and swallowed in special ways, food never tasted by mortals. His feet were washed with water.

Maricha enquired, "Lord of rakshasas, is all well in your kingdom? Your surprise visit fills my mind with misgiving."

Eloquent Ravana replied, "Rama has wiped out my entire contingent at Janasthana which I had thought invincible. He has killed my generals, Khara and Dushana. I need your help. I plan to abduct his wife Sita."

"Sire," said Maricha, "whoever has given you this advice is an enemy disguised as a friend. It is an insult to you. Who dares say, 'Abduct Sita'? Who wants to provoke this lion among men? Lord of rakshasas, Rama is a fearful, fathomless ocean; crocodiles are his bow, whirlpools his mighty arm, heaving waves his arrows, the watery expanse the battlefield. Compose your mind, sire, and return to Lanka. Enjoy the company of your wives, and let Rama enjoy his wife in the Dandaka forest."

Convinced, ten-headed Ravana returned to Lanka and re-entered his magnificent palace.

The massacre of Khara's fourteen thousand rakshasas infuriated Shurpanakha. Screaming in frustration and roaring like thunder, she went to Ravana's capital Lanka.

She saw Ravana blazing with glory on the terrace of his palace. Resplendently attired, he sat on his throne, adorned with garlands, like all-consuming Kala at the time of universal dissolution. She approached him and said harshly:

"Ravana, drowned in pleasures,

*Do you realise what has happened?
 A disaster is imminent.
 You are foolish to look the other way.
 Rama has singlehanded slaughtered
 Fourteen thousand rakshasas.
 Khara and Dushana are dead,
 While you wallow here,
 A slave to your passions.
 Haven't your spies reported anything?
 What's a sleeping king
 But a frayed garment, a withered garland?
 Wake up
 The time to decide is now.
 The time to act is now.
 Or you will perish.'*

Shurpanakha said this to Ravana in the presence of his ministers.
 Ravana asked angrily:

*"Who is Rama?
 How strong is he?
 What does he look like?
 What is he doing in Dandaka?
 Did he disfigure you?"*

Shurpanakha replied:

*"He is Dasharatha's son.
 He is like the god of love.
 Long-armed, large-eyed,
 Dressed in tree-bark and deerskin,
 With a golden bow.
 His brother is Lakshmana,
 Courageous, powerful, ingenious.
 Rama's wife is Sita,
 Large-eyed, lovely-haired.
 Sharp-nosed, smooth-thighed,
 Moon-faced beauty
 Like a goddess of the forest,*

*Like Lakshmi herself.
 Skin like molten gold,
 Curving pink nails,
 Slender-waisted, graceful-hipped.
 There is no one like her,
 No woman so voluptuous.
 She is the wife for you,
 You the husband for her.
 When you see Sita,
 You will fall in love with her
 Full-breasted beauty
 And gracious demeanour."*

Ravana went to Maricha again, after crossing the ocean. He saw Maricha in an enchanting, secluded ashram, practising *tapasya*; he was wearing deerskin and his hair was matted like an ascetic's.

"Listen to me, Maricha," he said. "I have made up my mind. I will take Sita away by force. I need your help. Rama will pine away. I will achieve my happiness by striking down helpless Rama."

Maricha ran his tongue over his fear-dried lips. He stared unseeingly like a corpse. Joining his palms in *anjali*, he said to Ravana, "Flatterers are easy to find. Rare is the man who speaks unpleasing words designed for one's benefit. Think—Sita is protected by her lustrous chastity: you can no more ravish her than you can steal the nimbus of the sun. Think of your strength and compare it with Rama's. Think carefully—weigh the advantages and the disadvantages. I say this for your good—give up your plan. Once upon a time I was strong, I had a body like a huge hill, I was as powerful as a thousand elephants. Rama was only twelve years old when I attacked the ashram of Vishvamitra. I dashed towards the altar, but Rama's arrow intercepted me and I was knocked senseless into the ocean. Rama spared my life and allowed me to return unharmed to Lanka. My friends, who tried to come to my aid, were killed by him, though he was only a child at the time. What crime is worse than abducting another's wife? You have thousands of wives—be happy with them, and save your dignity, fortune, kingdom, and life. If you reject my advice and abduct Sita, you, your relatives and your army are doomed."

"Listen, Maricha," said Ravana, "I have decided, and my

decision is final. I will abduct Sita. If you refuse to help me, I will kill you. I am your king, I am ordering you. You cannot refuse."

Maricha replied boldly, "Who has given you this fatal advice, O night-prowling monarch? Since I have no choice, so let it be. I will obey you, and I will perish at the hands of Rama. If you escape now, you will perish later."

Ravana embraced Maricha and said happily, "You are brave, Maricha. Now I know you are really Maricha. I was beginning to think you were some other rakshasa. Climb into my jewel-inlaid aerial chariot pulled by mules with the heads of blood-drinking *pishachas*. See how I seduce Sita and carry her away."

"As you wish," replied Maricha.

Ravana and Maricha climbed into the chariot that resembled an aerial vehicle, and flew up from the ashram. Spread below them were cities, forests, mountains, rivers; speedily they reached the forest of Dandaka.

Descending from his golden chariot in front of Rama's ashram, Ravana took Maricha's hand and said, "This is the ashram of Rama—the one ringed by plantain trees and flowering bushes. Let's finish our work quickly."

In a flash the rakshasa Maricha transformed himself into a deer frisking playfully at the entrance of the ashram.

*It was strange,
It was wonderful!
Sapphire-studded horns,
Black-and-white spotted head,
Mouth like a pink lotus,
Throat a blue lotus,
Bright-blue ears,
Neck craned forward,
Sapphire under-belly,
Flanks like a madhuka flower,
Cat's-eye hooves,
Slim, strong legs,
Rainbow tail,
Glossy skin*

*Freckled with jewels.
The ashram of Rama
Dazzled with the radiance
Of the Maricha-deer.
Champing the grass, he roamed
At will among the flowers,
Nibbling at tender shoots,
Irresistibly enchanting.
In the plantain grove,
Among the karnikaras,
Trying to attract Sita,
He paused. Then, gracefully,
To and fro again,
A lotus-lovely deer
Playing games, disappearing
For an hour, returning,
Leaping, crouching, eager
To catch Sita's eye,
Suddenly leading
A herd of timid deer,
Suddenly spinning
In front of her eyes. . .
Scenting the rakshasa
Disguised as a deer,
The other fawns and gazelles
Fled helter-skelter. . .
He let them go,
The deer-devourer,
Not wishing to betray
His real intentions. . .*

*Bewitching-eyed Sita,
Lovely-faced Sita,
Was gathering flowers
In the groves of karnikara,
Ashoka and mango,
When she glimpsed the deer,
The gem-studded creature,
The silver-skinned animal,*

*A vision of enchantment!
Her eyes dilated
In wonder and joy.
The delicate deer
Saw the wife of Rama
And frisked and leapt
In front of her eyes,
Drenching the forest
With celestial radiance—
A marvellous maya
Never seen before!*

*Lovely-limbed Sita,
Gold-skinned Sita,
Was gathering flowers
When she saw the deer
With gold and silver flanks.
“My lord, look!” she called.
“Come here with your brother!”
Her eyes remained fixed
On the golden deer.
Rama and Lakshmana
Looked at the deer.
“It’s a trick,” said Lakshmana,
“It’s Maricha the rakshasa
Disguised as a deer.
It’s magician’s maya,
A deer of desire.
He is known for his wiles,
He waylays kings
Who come hunting, and kills them.*

*Sita, delighted,
Deluded, smiling,
Interrupted Lakshmana.
“Oh I’m thrilled!
He’s so lovely!
Give him to me!
Let me play with him.*



*He dazzles the forest!
He shines like the moon!
Lovely grace!
Lovely radiance!
Lovely skin!
He's altogether lovely!
He's stolen my heart.
Capture him alive,
He'll make me happy!
When our exile is over,
I'll take him to Ayodhya.
Oh Rama, my husband,
He'll delight Bharata,
And you, and me,
And my mothers-in-law!
If you can't catch him alive,
Get me his skin,
His golden skin,
I'll spread his hide
And sit on it!
Forgive me, my husband,
I'm only a woman,
But what can I do?—
I'm possessed by his beauty,
I must have him,
I cannot do without him!"*

*Rama too was enchanted.
He said to Lakshmana:
"Sita is enraptured.
The beauty of this deer
Will cost him his life.
Unearthly beauty—
Not in Nandana,
Not in Chaitraratha,
Nowhere on earth,
Is such beauty seen.
Look at his fur—
So glossily smooth!*

*Brushed either way, it glistens.
 Look at his tongue—
 It darts like a flame,
 Like lightning from cloud.
 His mouth's all sapphire;
 His belly's a conch-shell. . .
 Slim-waisted Sita
 Will sit with me
 On the golden hide of this deer.
 He's going to die, Lakshmana,
 Though you say he's maya.
 Too many sages have succumbed
 To the wiles of Maricha.
 Let's kill him today.
 Keep guard over Sita.
 I shall kill this deer
 With a single arrow.
 Till I return,
 Stay in the ashram
 And, together with Jatayu
 Who is wise and strong,
 Protect Sita."*

*With these words, Rama
 Buckled on his sword
 In its golden scabbard,
 Lifted his three-curved bow
 With two quivers of arrows,
 And strode out.*

*He pursued
 The elusive deer,
 Which lured him on,
 Alternately leaping and pausing,
 Then suddenly plunging
 Deep in the forest.
 So Maricha the deer
 Enchanted Rama,
 In fits and starts,
 Like the bright moon of autumn*

*Periodically glimpsed
 In argent loveliness
 Through thick cloud-clusters.
 Now seen,
 Now invisible. . .
 Now stationary,
 Now in flight. . .
 Till Rama in fury
 Fitted a sun-bright arrow,
 Pulled it taut,
 And fired the snake-shaft.
 It pierced the heart of Maricha!
 The impact swung the deer up
 High as a palm tree,
 Then he thudded down
 In a heap, mortally wounded,
 Shrieking,
 Re-transformed as Maricha.*

*At the right time,
 Recalling Ravana's instructions,
 In a perfect imitation
 Of Rama's voice,
 Dying Maricha moaned,
 "Hai Sita! Hai Lakshmana!"
 Rama heard the blood-
 Splattered rakshasa
 Moan, and thought:
 It is Maricha.
 Lakshmana was right.
 It was all a maya.
 What grief must Sita
 And Lakshmana be feeling
 Hearing Maricha's moan
 In my voice?*

*He horriplated.
 Dharma Rama was filled
 With a terrible fear.
 He quickly killed another deer*

*And made his way back
To the ashram.*

*Hearing Rama's piteous cry,
Sita said to Lakshmana:
"That was Rama's voice.
Go quickly, see what's happened.
I am so upset,
I can't breathe properly,
My heart's palpitating.
I know it was his voice,
He was crying for help.
He needs you. Go!
The rakshasas have trapped him."*

*Remembering Rama's command,
Lakshmana did not stir.
Sita flared up:
"What is wrong, Lakshmana?
Don't you love your brother?
Why this hesitation?
Would you rather he died?
Do you desire me so much
That you'd have him dead?
That must be the reason,
Or surely you'd rush to help him.
What use am I safe
When my husband's in danger?"
She sobbed and trembled
Like a frightened fawn.*

*Lakshmana replied: "Devi,
Nothing can harm Rama—
Not gods, not gandharvas,
Not rakshasas, not wild beasts.
He is like Indra.
Do not say this to me!
I will not leave you alone.
Rama will return.*

*The voice you heard is a maya,
As unreal as the sky-city
Of the gandharvas. My orders are
To protect you. I will obey them.
Do not fear, Sita."*

*Lakshmana spoke the truth,
But agitated Sita,
Eyes red with anger,
Said:*

*"Spineless, shameless man!
Disgracer of your family name!
You enjoy Rama's misfortune,
Don't you?*

*Or why would you say
Such uncaring words?
So! It was all pretence then?—
Pretending to help him,
You desired me sinfully.
What are you—Bharata's agent?
I tell you this, Lakshmana—
It won't work—this plot
Of yours and Bharata's!
Did you really expect me
To lust for you when I have
Dark-blue skinned Rama,
Lotus-eyed Rama, as my husband?
Rather death than that, Lakshmana.
Without Rama, I could not live
One instant."*

*These masculine words of Sita
Horried sense-disciplined Lakshmana.
Horripilating,
He joined his palms in anjali,
And said to her:
"I will not say a word.
You are a goddess to me.
Princess of Mithila,*

*Women do say strange things.
That's the way women are.
One sees it all the time, everywhere.
They flout dharma,
They are fickle and peevish,
Always creating trouble.
I am aghast at your words,
O daughter of Janaka—
They pierce my ears like flaming rods!
Witness this,
O creatures of the forest!
Witness the bitter words flung by Sita
At good-willed Lakshmana!
Shame on you, Sita!
Shame on you for distrusting me!
Shame on your womanhood!
Shame on you for maligning me
When all I did
Was obey my elder brother!
O lovely-eyed lady,
Svasti te-astu,
May good go with you!
I go now to Rama.
May the gods of the forest protect you.
I see terrible omens:
I do not know if I shall see you here
When I return with Rama."*

*Listening to Lakshmana,
Sita burst into tears.
She sobbed: "Without Rama,
I shall jump in the Godavari,
I will hang myself,
I shall fall off a cliff,
I shall embrace fire,
I shall take poison and die.
I will touch no man but Rama."
She clutched at her waist
And broke into loud lament.*

*Lakshmana tried comforting her,
 She refused to speak to him.
 He kept looking at her again and again.
 Then he did anjali before her,
 And left quickly to search for Rama.*

In the meantime Ravana came to the ashram in the guise of a wandering mendicant. He wore saffron, the sacred tuft-knot adorned his head; he carried a trident and a half-coconut shell. He found Sita alone at the time of evening twilight. It was becoming dark, Rama and Lakshmana were absent—like night swiftly descending when sun and moon are missing.

As Ravana with blood-red eyes approached, the tree leaves of Janasthana stopped fluttering, the wind subsided, and the waters of the Godavari were suddenly hushed.

Ten-headed Ravana, a well overgrown with grass, rakshasa-turned-beggar, stared at Sita—lovely Sita, Rama's wife Sita, full-moon-faced beauty, with eyes like lotus petals, wearing yellow silk—sitting on a cushion of leaves; she was sobbing quietly.

Struck by the arrows of kama, but chanting sacred verses, Ravana approached her, and spoke to her sweetly, praising her as a lotus-less Lakshmi:

*“Lady who shines like silver,
 Lady who shines like gold,
 Lady dressed in yellow silk,
 Lady like a lotus pool
 With your garlands of lotuses,
 Are you the goddess of modesty Hri,
 Are you the goddess of fame Kirti,
 Are you gracious Lakshmi,
 Are you an apsara,
 Are you the goddess of mystic powers Bhuti,
 Are you the goddess of love Rati?
 Even, smooth, pure-white are your teeth
 like jasmine buds,
 Gently pink at the rims are your eyes
 with dark pupils,*

*Tapering and graceful are your thighs
 like an elephant's trunk,
 Rounded and ample are your hips,
 Large and firm are your breasts
 touching each other,
 Pointed and prominent their nipples,
 Two smooth, round fruits of the tala tree
 pretty with pearls.*
*Sweet-smiling lady.
 Sweet-teethed lady,
 Sweet-eyed lady,
 You have ravished my heart
 Like a river current flooding
 the banks of a river!*
*Lady with firm and close-touching breasts,
 Your waist is so slim,
 A thumb and index finger encircle it perfectly.
 No goddess,
 No gandharva girl,
 No yaksha beauty,
 No mortal woman,
 can equal your loveliness.*
*Why do you dwell in this forest?
 Leave this place!
 Do not stay here!
 Prosper elsewhere!
 This is the home of night-prowlers
 who change form at will.*
*Dark-eyed lady,
 Live in palaces and cities,
 Wander in aromatic gardens,
 Buy sumptuous dresses,
 Wear fragrant garlands,
 Choose a worthy husband.*
*Sweet-smiling one, who are you?
 Are you married to the Rudras, the Maruts, the Vasus?
 Neither gods nor gandharvas nor kinnaras
 Live in this forest.
 How are you here,*

*Among monkeys, lions, tigers, wolves,
Bears, hyenas, vultures?
Among musth elephants?
And why are you all alone
In the terrible Dandaka forest?"*

Praised so highly by Ravana in the disguise of a Brahmin mendicant, Sita offered him the hospitality due to an unexpected guest. She offered him a seat, water to wash his feet, and said, "Please accept this simple meal of forest food."

Ravana looked fixedly at Sita; he was determined to abduct her; he was determined on self-destruction.

Sita stared out into the darkness of the surrounding forest; there was no sign of Rama or Lakshmana returning.

She thought: *He is a Brahmin and a guest. I shall have to please him; or he may curse me.*

*"Sir," Sita said,
"I am Sita.
My father is noble-minded Janaka,
King of Mithila.
I am Rama's beloved wife.
My husband was twentyfive, I eighteen,
When it happened:
My father-in-law, Maharaja Dasharatha,
Infatuated by kama for his wife Kaikeyi,
Installed her son Bharata regent
Instead of my husband
Who was exiled for fourteen years.
But tell me, sir,
Who are you?
Why are you, a Brahmin, alone here
In the Dandaka forest?"*

"Sita," replied the rakshasa, "I am Ravana, king of the rakshasas. Gods, rakshasas, and humans tremble at the mention of my name. After seeing you, faultless lady, dressed in silk, dazzling like gold, I have lost interest in my queens. Become my chief queen, and rule over all the others I have abducted and taken to

my capital, Lanka. Come to my gardens, Sita, forget the forest. Become my queen, and order five thousand servants to do your wishes."

Enraged, Sita replied contemptuously:

*"I am devoted to Rama.
He is strong as a rock,
Serene as the ocean,
The equal of Indra,
All-sheltering as the banyan.
I am devoted to Rama,
He is strong-armed,
He is broad-chested, lion-gaited,
He is lion-magnificent!
I am devoted to him.
His face is the full moon,
He is self-disciplined,
He is excellently royal.
You are a jackal—
And you want me, a lioness!
Do you dare touch the sun?
You seek to lift the Mandara mountain?
Will you prick your eyes with a needle?
Will you lick a razor with your tongue?
You want to swim the ocean with a stone
round your neck?
You want to run away with Rama's wife?
You want to carry a raging fire
in your garment?
Rama's a lion, you a jackal,
He's an ocean, you a rivulet,
He's amrita nectar, you stale gruel,
He's gold, you're iron,
He's sandalwood, you're mud,
He's an elephant, you a cat,
He's Garuda, you a crow,
He's a peacock, you a duck,
He's a swan, you a vulture.
You can abduct me,*

*But so long as Rama lives,
You can no more enjoy me
Than a fly floundering in ghee."*

Ravana knit his brows and said:

*"Lovely lady, may you prosper!
My name is Ravana, I am ten-headed,
My half-brother is Kubera, god of wealth,
I vanquished him and he fled,
He hides now on Kailasa.
I took his aerial chariot Pushpaka,
Seeing my fearful face,
The gods are terrified.
Where I go, wind calms,
Sun-rays become moon-beams,
Rivers stop flowing,
Tree leaves cease rustling.
Come with me!
Enjoy celestial pleasures!
Forget Rama:
What's he but a mere mortal
Doomed soon to die?
Don't spurn me, or you'll suffer
The fate of Urvashi
Who kicked Pururavas.
I passionately desire you.
Accept me."*

Sita replied angrily:

*"You are Kubera's brother, you say.
How then can you stoop so low
As to make these obscene overtures?
The ravisher of Shachi, wife of Indra,
May survive—but anyone molesting me
Is doomed. He cannot escape."*

"Sita," retorted Ravana,

*“Have you never heard of me?
 Have you lost your senses?
 I can stand in mid-air
 and lift up the earth,
 I can drink dry
 the ocean’s waters,
 I can pierce the sun,
 sunder the earth.
 Look, proud woman!”*

Suddenly Ravana’s eyes glowed; they became crimson; they burned. He changed shape, becoming killer Kala himself. He changed again—this time he had ten heads and twenty arms; he was wearing a red robe. He said to her:

*“If you’re looking for a husband
 Renowned in the three worlds,
 Here I am!
 Serve me!
 I will never displease you.
 Why are you so fond of Rama?
 He is banished, he is finished.”*

Quickly, Ravana reached out and seized gentle Sita. He was inflamed by passion. His left hand pulled at lotus-eyed Sita’s hair, his right grasped her thigh.

His golden aerial chariot materialised out of the sky. He lifted Sita and climbed into it with her in his arms.

She screamed, “Rama! Rama!”

She saw Jatayu on a tree, and cried, “Noble Jatayu, he is taking me away. Inform Rama and Lakshmana!”

Her words aroused the sleeping giant vulture. Jatayu reasoned with Ravana: “Ravana, I am Jatayu, king of the vultures. I know dharma, I have studied the *Puranas*, I am firm in truth. Brother, be sensible! Sita is another’s wife. How can a raja who practises dharma lay hands on another’s wife? Ravana, beware! You are carrying a poisonous snake in your arms. You are putting Death’s noose round your neck. I am sixty thousand years old, Ravana. I am very old, you are young and armed. But I will not let you



abduct Sita. You can no more ravish her than logic can refute *shruti*, the wisdom of the Vedas. I warn you—stop! Think, ten-headed king! You'll be hurled from your chariot like ripe fruit from a branch. I challenge you to a fight!"

Ravana, eyes flashing in anger, charged at Jatayu. They collided, like two clouds clashing, like two winged mountains.

Jatayu slashed the swift rakshasa-headed mules dead. His talons damaged the chariot. With his wings he demolished the canopy.

Ravana gripped Sita tight on his left side, and lunged with his right hand at the vulture. Jatayu sliced off Ravana's ten left arms with one bite of his beak. In a flash ten more arms appeared in their place, like venom-spitting snakes emerging from an ant-hill.

In desperation, Ravana let go of Sita, and attacked Jatayu in full force. One swing of his sword severed the vulture's talons and wings.

Jatayu staggered, and plummeted to earth. He lay unmoving, vomiting blood, dying.

Sita rushed to his side as she would to a close relative. Jatayu was still, like a spent forest fire. She knelt beside him and embraced him.

Ravana pushed her into the chariot and rose into the sky.

Petals from the flowers in her hair fluttered slowly down on earth: they rained on the body of Jatayu as the chariot flew swiftly to its destination.

Her jewels scattered like meteoric debris, jingling as they hit the ground. Her necklace of pearls slipped from her breast like the white waters of the Ganga sliding from the sky.

The trees whispered conspiratorially, reassuring her, "Do not fear!" The fish-filled lakes seemed to weep for Sita.

And the creatures of nature seemed to be lamenting, "There is no dharma, there is no truth, there is no gentleness," as Sita passed by, hair loosely waving in the wind, her tilak erased, her smile gone, and she moaning, "O Rama! O Lakshmana!"

Sita looked around her—there was no one to save her. From the corner of her eye she spotted a group of five tree-men atop a hill. The lovely large-eyed lady unloosened her gold-worked and jewel-embroidered upper garment, saying to herself: *They will find it and inform Rama.* It gracefully descended in their midst.

Ravana was too preoccupied to notice what Sita had done.

Lifting Sita in his arms, Ravana strode into the inner apartments of his palace in Lanka.

He thundered at the rakshasis guarding the rooms: "No man or woman looks at Sita without my permission! Let her have pearls, gold, rubies, clothes, ornaments—whatever she desires. Anyone who utters one harsh word to her dies by my order!"

Leaving Sita in the custody of the rakshasi guards, Ravana began planning his next move.

Pierced by the arrows of kama, he first hurried back to have a glimpse of her. He saw Sita weeping, surrounded by female guards, like a wind-buffed boat on a sea or a gazelle that has strayed from the herd and is pursued by hounds.

"Large-eyed lady," he pleaded, "all that I have, including my life, is yours. I love you more than I love my life. Become my wife, and rule as chief queen of the other ladies here. I am tormented by love for you. Look gently on me, grant me the favour of your grace. Youth is brief, lovely one; enjoy it with me."

Lovely Sita covered her moon-like face, allowing her tears to fall.

Ravana assured pale-cheeked Sita, "Do not fear, Sita, you are not doing anything that goes against dharma. Our union is permitted by the Vedas. I caress your soles with my hands, Devi, I am your slave, grant me your favour. Let the plea spoken from love's anguish not go fruitless! Ravana has never before offered *pranama* to any woman."

Having said this, Ravana thought: *Now at last she is mine.*

Sita placed a blade of grass between herself and Ravana—a silent medium between chaste woman and stranger—and said:

*"A low-caste may not approach an altar;
A dharma-cherishing wife, a dharma-patni,
May not be solicited by you,
A mischief-motivated rakshasa.
Why should I, a royal swan, sporting
With her mate in a lotus-filled lake,
Prefer a duck on the bank?
Chain me,
Maul my body, ravish it, destroy it,*

I will not submit to dishonour."

Ravana replied, "I warn you, princess of Mithila. You have exactly twelve months. If by that time, sweet-smiling lady, you do not agree, I'll have your flesh chopped and served as my meal."

Turning to the rakshasi guards, he shouted, "You horrible flesh-eaters, crush the pride of this foolish woman! Now!"

Stamping violently on the floor, he ordered, "Take her to the ashoka grove! Surround her! Sweetly, roughly, secretly, openly, tame her—tame her as one tames an elephant."

The rakshasis escorted Sita away to the ashoka grove—an enchanting garden of wish-fulfilling trees replete with fruits and flowers and birds making love perennially.

Exhausted by fear and worry, Sita collapsed like an ensnared fawn. She remembered her husband and her brother-in-law, and fainted in her grief.

Rama met Lakshmana coming from the direction of the ashram and enquired anxiously, "Why have you left Sita alone? I placed her in your care. Lakshmana, I am worried, I scent danger. My left eye is twitching, my left arm is throbbing, my heart is thumping."

Lakshmana replied distressfully, "I did not leave her of my own will. She insisted that I go to help you. She kept saying, 'Go! Go!' She said, 'You want to enjoy me when my husband dies. You are Bharata's agent. You are Rama's enemy. You want to harm him.' I left the ashram instantly."

Rama, agitated, said, "You did wrong, Lakshmana, to leave Sita alone. You know I am fully capable of defending myself against rakshasas, yet you let yourself be influenced by her anger and you deserted her! I am not happy that you should come here after getting provoked by a woman's temper. You have disobeyed me. Your action is unjustifiable and unworthy of you."

As Rama was returning to the ashram, his left eye again began to twitch; he stumbled, and shivered inexplicably. These inauspicious omens made him ask Lakshmana, "Is all well with Sita?"

He hurried his pace. The ashram was deserted. Without Sita, the hut looked like a withered lotus.

Rama ran from tree to tree, searching along river and stream, everywhere.

"*Kadamba* tree," he cried, "where is my beloved Sita? *Bilva* tree, have you seen her who wears yellow silk and whose breasts are as shapely as your fruit? *Arjuna* tree, tell me where she is, for she loved you dearly."

*"Where are you hiding,
My lotus-eyed wife?
Are you hiding behind trees?
Have you no feeling for me?
Where are you, my beloved?"*

Turning to Lakshmana, Rama said, "Search along the river Godavari, Lakshmana. Sita might be there, looking for lotuses."

When Lakshmana returned, saying, "I could not find her anywhere," Rama took his bow from Lakshmana's hands, stretched it taut, fitted a snake-shaft and, fierce as the all-consuming fire at the end of a yuga, he announced, "No one escapes old age, destiny, and killer Kala! And no one will survive my wrath today. If the gods do not restore Sita to me today, I will annihilate the universe and all its gods, gandharvas, human beings, and *nagas*."

Lakshmana, terrified, joined his palms in *anjali* and pleaded, "You are gentle, disciplined, and devoted to the welfare of the worlds. Control your anger. Finest of men, show courage! Is there any creature who doesn't suffer? Calamity comes without warning like fire, and departs as suddenly. What matters is discrimination between right and wrong. After discriminating, one should act. Act now to rout your adversary!"

Rama muttered sadly, "But what shall we do now, Lakshmana? Where shall we go? How will we succeed in finding Sita again?"

Lakshmana started re-searching in the forest, and Rama advanced with a steel arrow fitted to his bow. Suddenly he glimpsed Jatayu, king of birds, lying in a pool of blood like a toppled mountain peak.

The dharma-devoted bird whispered to Rama, "Sita has been abducted by the lord of the rakshasas, Ravana, with the help of maya. He severed my wings, and flew south. I am gasping, Rama, my eyes fail me, I am about to die. Do not lose heart. You will

recover Sita after killing Ravana in battle."

"More! Tell me more!" pleaded Rama, standing with palms joined in *anjali*.

But the life-breaths of the giant vulture had departed. He twitched, and died.

Dharmatma Rama prepared a funeral pyre and lit the wood as if cremating a close relative. Killing a few deer, he placed their flesh on the green grass as an oblation to the dead bird.

After completing the last rites of Jatayu, Rama and Lakshmana proceeded south-west till they came to the ashram of Matanga.

While combing the forest they stumbled on a cave as enormous and pitch dark as the nether region of Patala.

As they neared it, they were confronted by a horrendous-looking rakshasi with a massive stomach, teeth like fangs, hugely tall, and shrill-voiced.

She accosted them, saying, "Come, let's have fun!"

She caught hold of Lakshmana who was walking ahead, hugged him, and said, "I am Ayomukhi, and I am yours. Come, let's make love on the slopes of hills and on the banks of rivers."

Lakshmana pulled out his sword and chopped off her ears, nose, and breasts. She screamed and fled.

The two brothers hurriedly left the place and proceeded ahead.

Suddenly, a commotion in the trees—as if a windy blast had swept through them.

Rama advanced bow in hand. He faced a huge-thighed rakshasa—a headless monster with his mouth where his stomach was, a hill-huge hirsute adversary with a voice like thunder and skin as dark as a rain-cloud.

"Who are you?" asked the headless creature. "I am famished. You have roused me, and you will die."

But Rama swiftly severed the rakshasa's right arm, and Lakshmana sliced his left, with their swords. Streams of blood spurted from the mutilated shoulders of the rakshasa.

He asked weakly, "Who are you?"

Lakshmana replied, "This is Rama, of the Ikshvakus, and I am his younger brother Lakshmana."

"Welcome!" said the rakshasa. "You have redeemed me! I will tell you how I came to possess this horrible shape. It was all because of my pride. My name is Kabandha. A sage named Sthu-

lashira cursed me when I was arrogantly harassing him, but he added, 'When Rama cremates you in the forest, you will regain your handsome form.' You have come, O lord Rama! May you prosper! The sage's words have come true."

Rama and Lakshmana placed the corpse of Kabandha on a funeral pyre in the hollow of a hill.

As the body burnt, the flames leapt higher, and Kabandha rose from the ashes—a handsome figure wearing a celestial garland, with many blinding-bright ornaments; he climbed into a shining chariot pulled by flying swans. From the sky he said to Rama, "I will tell you how you can recover Sita. One can overcome political misfortune in six ways—by making peace, by fighting a war, by attacking first, by excellent fortification and fortitude, by sowing dissension, and by seeking others' protection. You need the help of a friend. There is a tree-man chief, a *vanara* called Sugriva. He has been banished by his brother Vali, the son of Indra. Brave Sugriva lives with four close friends on the high mountain called Rishyamuka near Lake Pampa.

"Sugriva is brave, loyal, intelligent, generous, wise, and powerful. Go to him. Make an alliance with him. He is the chief of the *vanaras*—he can change form at will—he is very resourceful and helpful—he will advise you.

"He knows all about the ways of rakshasas. His followers will search every nook and cranny in every hill and cave until they find Sita. He will penetrate Ravana's kingdom in order to find her and bring her back to you."

Following Kabandha's advice, Rama and Lakshmana set out towards Lake Pampa. They arrived at Shabari's ashram; the elderly lady hermit rose and welcomed them, in accordance with spiritual dharma.

She said, "Your darshan today has fulfilled my *tapasya*. My long service to my gurus has at last been rewarded. When you arrived in Chitrakuta, the hermits I revered and served said to me, 'Rama is coming to your ashram. Receive him with all honour and hospitality. His darshan will give you total liberation. Now it is over—I can abandon my flesh-frame and be with the holy hermits whom I gladly served and whose ashram this was.'"

Rama said to Shabari, "It is not I, it is you who have honoured me, noble lady. Go now where it pleases you."

Shabari, in deer-skin and tree-bark robes, walked into the fire. She rose into the sky like a blinding flash of lightning. Her devoted piety transported her to the realms of the holy and the blessed.

Rama said to Lakshmana, "Let us walk beside the lovely lake Pampa. I am eager to meet Sugriva, chief of the *vanaras*, who can help us find Sita."

All around them were trees blossoming richly, and pools with cranes, peacocks and other birds whose calls sweetened the air. There were lotuses and lilies, and *aravinda* and *utpala* flowers, and hibiscus bushes, and mango groves.

Suddenly Rama said, "Lakshmana, how must Sita be passing her days without me?" Pricked by memories of his lost love, Rama gazed at the enchanting, bird-melodious Lake Pampa.

BOOK FOUR

Kishkindha-Kanda

(IN KISHKINDHA)

Rama, under the influence of kama, saw the lake of Pampa carpeted with lotuses of various colours, and sighed to Lakshmana:

*“It is lovely, Lakshmana,
This lotus-filled lake,
Lovely its lapis lazuli waves,
It is spring now,
The sweet month of Chaitra,
Season of love,
Of fruits and flowers.
Radiant the trees
Raining their petals
Like monsoon showers!
Look at the karnikaras,
Yellow-robed trees
With bright-red blossoms!
They are so beautiful
They remind me of Sita.
Spring is a fire, Lakshmana,
It consumes me!
I think of her lovely eyes,
Her sweet voice,
I hear the kokilas calling,
I break out in sweat,
The pain is unbearable,
It is a cruel spring!
I see Lake Pampa shining,
I see lilies swaying
On the breasts of the waves.
Without beloved Sita,
Life seems meaningless.
I am tormented!
What pleased me, she present,
Is hateful, she absent.
I see lotus buds like cups,
And I think: Sita’s eyes.
The scent-laden breeze,
I say: Sita’s breath.
If Sita were here now,*

*I would be born anew!
 Lakshmana, I think—I think
 I am going mad.
 If Kaushalya asks me,
 In Ayodhya, ‘How is Sita?’
 What will I tell her?
 What will she think?’*

To Rama, drowning in extreme grief, Lakshmana spoke reasonably and reassuringly;

*“Patience, my brother!
 Have courage.
 Give up this obsession.
 Even a damp wick will light up
 When placed next to fire.
 Make up your mind.
 There’s nothing like work,
 Nothing like planned effort.
 Struggle hard—and succeed.
 That is the way
 To get back Sita.”*

By this time, they had arrived near Mount Rishyamuka. The chief of the *vanaras*, Sugriva, observed their entry, but refrained from accosting them. The mahatma elephant-gaited chief kept track of the two princes.

Sugriva was alarmed by the presence of Rama and Lakshmana and tried his best to avoid them. In his agitation he summoned his counsellors, pointed out the two princes to them, and said:

“It is Vali who has sent them here disguised as hermits, in order to ferret out our secrets.”

Sugriva’s counsellors bounded from one crest to another and formed a circle around him. They uprooted trees in their wild leaps that made the slopes of hills reverberate, and the deer, wild cats and tigers watched in petrified amazement.

Skilled-in-speech Hanuman said to terrified Sugriva, “It is not

Vali, sire! You need not fear. This is not one of his ruses. Your fierce elder brother is not responsible. Think clearly—and don't jump to frivolous conclusions like a monkey."

Sugriva replied with even more reason to Hanuman's reasonable words, "Who wouldn't panic seeing these two large-eyed, god-like warriors armed with bows and arrows? Vali is very cunning, and knows many tricks. He is a raja, and rajas have many friends to help them. Who knows these two might be his spies? Go, Hanuman, disguise yourself as a human and find out the identity of these strangers. Observe them carefully—their speech, their manners, their gestures, what they want, why they are here."

"I will do so," replied Hanuman, and hurried to meet Rama and Lakshmana.

He leapt off Rishyamuka hill and planted himself in front of the two brothers.

He had discarded his *vanara* form and assumed the disguise of a wandering mendicant.

He spoke gently to the brothers, after honouring and praising them, "Virile strangers, who are you? Your skins have the sheen of gold, you are dressed in tree-bark, you have bulging muscles, your presence frightens all . . . You must be warriors, yet you are dressed as ascetics. *Dharmatma* Sugriva is the chief of the *vanaras* here. He has been banished by his brother. He has instructed me to speak to you on his behalf because he desires to be friends with you. I am his counsellor, I am the son of Vayu the wind-god; I can go where I please and assume any form I desire; I have come from Rishyamuka mountain as his messenger disguised as a *bhikshu*."

Skilful-in-speech Hanuman lapsed into sudden silence.

Rama happily turned to Lakshmana, who was standing by his side, "This is the minister of the noble king of the *vanaras*, Sugriva. How courteously, how mellifluently he speaks! Only a person who has studied and absorbed the Rig, Sama, and Yajur Vedas can speak as he does. Not a single grammatical error! In his eyes, brow, limbs, attitude, there is nothing displeasing or incongruous. He has depth, volume, modulation, confidence. He speaks from a happy fusion of heart, throat and head. Even an enemy would be charmed by such felicity of diction, such distinction of meaning."

Hanuman, flattered by Rama's words, repeated his question,

“What brings you to this dangerous, inaccessible forest?”

Lakshmana, on a hint from Rama, replied, “This is Rama, the first-born son of Dasharatha: he was banished by his father; he has honoured the parental order and come here with his wife Sita. I am Lakshmana, his inferior in every way, and I have followed him here. Rama comes here to seek a favour from Sugriva, king of the *vanaras*.”

Hanuman, giving up his mendicant’s disguise, re-assumed his original form. He rubbed two sticks together and kindled a fire. He worshipped the fire by placing flowers around it.

Later, Rama and Sugriva did *pradakshina* around the sacred fire and were united in friendship.

“You are now my friend,” said Sugriva. “In joy and in sorrow we are one.”

Sugriva snapped a flower-laden sal branch and placed it on the ground. He and Rama sat on it. Hanuman offered Lakshmana a bough of sandalwood blossoms.

“Rama,” said Sugriva gently, “I am a hounded and harassed being. My wife has been forcibly taken away from me, and I have sought shelter in this forest. I live in terror here. My brother Vali is my enemy. Protect me from Vali. Drive away my fear.”

Upholder-of-dharma Rama smiled and replied, “The fruit of friendship is help to a friend in crisis. I will kill Vali, who has dared separate you from your wife.”

(As Rama promised this, the lotus-like left eye of Sita twitched; so did the gold-bright left eye of Sugriva; and the fire-scorching left eye of the rakshasa Ravana.)

Sugriva said affectionately to Rama, “Hanuman has told me your entire story. Sita has been abducted by Ravana, and Jatayu killed. But I promise to bring her back, wherever she may be, in heaven or hell.

“I was standing on top of a hill when Sita dropped her upper garment; it fluttered down. Her jewels also fell among us—there were five of my companions with me at the time. I will show them to you; you will be able to identify them.”

Rama examined the garment and tears came to his eyes. His love for Sita upset his composure and he slumped on the ground.

“*Hai priya!*” he exclaimed, pressing the jewels to his chest and sighing like a snake hissing in its hole. “*Hai beloved!*”

To Lakshmana he said, "These are Sita's jewels, this is her garment."

Lakshmana replied, 'I do not know about the bracelets and earrings, but I recognise the anklets; I respected her, so I gazed at her feet only.'

Next day Sugriva broke a luxuriously leafy and flowering branch of a sal tree and spread it as a mat on the ground for Rama to sit on.

"Rama," he said, "my mind is filled with dread of my hostile brother Vali. What can I say? He is, after all, my own brother, and yet my sorrows will end only with his death. There is no other way. I grieve to tell you this—but this is the truth. Happy or unhappy, a friend must trust a friend."

Rama enquired, "Tell me, why are both of you bitter enemies? I will decide to help you only after I know the reason."

"A woman started it," replied Sugriva. "Dundhubi's son Mayavi and my brother Vali quarrelled over her. One night Mayavi arrived at the gates of Kishkindha and challenged Vali to a duel.

"My brother was only too eager. His wives and I tried to stop him, but it was impossible. Because I loved him, I followed him.

"The rakshasa Mayavi fled, seeing the two of us, but we overtook him. There was a huge tunnel-like pit in front—he flung himself headlong into it. We stopped at the edge.

"Vali said to me, 'Stay outside this dark cave-like hole, Sugriva. I'll fish him out and kill him!'"

"Saying this, he disappeared inside.

"A whole year passed. I waited outside, standing guard. No sign of him.

"I concluded he had died. *The rakshasa has killed him*, I thought.

"After some more time, a frothy mixture of blood and foam issued out of the hole. I could hear the noise of shrill war cries, but not the voice of my brother.

"Giving him up for dead, I blocked the mouth of the hole with a hill-huge boulder. After which, I offered the ritual water oblation to the memory of my brother, and returned to Kishkindha.

"I told no one, but rumours reached the ears of the ministers, and they unanimously installed me king.

"I ruled the kingdom justly. In the meantime, Vali returned, after killing the rakshasa. When he saw me sitting on the throne, he turned livid with rage. He imprisoned his ministers, putting them in chains. I offered him homage, but he insulted me and refused to acknowledge my sincere reverence. I placed the crown at his feet, but he was adamant—he refused to forgive me.

"He hounded me out of the kingdom with nothing to call my own but the single piece of cloth I had on. He was ruthless and shameless, he tortured me, he snatched even my wife from me.

"I took cover in this inaccessible mountain with some of my closest friends. Vali has no way of reaching me here because of the curse on him by the sage named Matanga.

"This is the reason why we brothers hate each other. Help me, Rama. I do not deserve the humiliation that I have suffered."

Dharma-knowing and dharma-practising Rama said, "My sun-bright arrows will soon destroy Vali. He will prosper only till such time as I do not see him; when I do, the molester of your wife is doomed."

To inspire confidence in Sugriva, Rama lifted his bow, aimed it, and fired a deafening arrow at a clump of sal trees. The gold-decorated shaft sliced through seven sal trees, penetrated the earth, swerved and, with blinding speed, whizzed back into its quiver.

Sugriva watched with wonder, and prostrated himself before Rama.

"Lead us to Kishkindha," said Rama.

Outside the gates of Vali's capital Kishkindha, they crouched behind a thick grove of trees, while Sugriva roared challenge to his brother. Vali rushed out like the sun from behind a huge hill.

They clashed like two planets colliding.

Rama watched, unable to release his fatal arrow because, from a distance, he could not distinguish one brother from another.

In desperation, Sugriva fled to the Rishyamuka mountain. His body was a dripping mass of blood.

Vali shouted, "Coward! Run! I spare your life." The curse prevented him from pursuing his brother into the mountain fastness.

Sugriva kept staring fixedly at the ground. Ashamed, in a broken voice he said to Rama, "You showed me your prowess, and you urged me to attack him. Why have you done this to me? You could have said openly, 'I don't want to kill Vali.' I would never have

attacked him then."

Noble-minded Sugriva said this sadly; Rama replied, "Listen to me, dear friend. I could not make out who was who—your dress, ornaments, figure and gestures were identical! Supposing I had hit you by mistake! You gave us shelter, we are grateful to you. It's a terrible sin to kill one's ally. Take my advice—attack him again. This time I will see to it that I don't get confused."

Sugriva advanced again, and hid behind the cluster of trees outside Kishkindha. Thick-necked Sugriva screamed his war-cry, and strode forward like a lion, like the rising sun.

Vali was inside the ladies' apartments when he heard Sugriva's challenge. His sensuality hardened into violent loathing; he rose, like a sun in eclipse, like a lotus pool with its flowers uprooted, and marched out with thumping, angry strides.

His wife Tara clung to him lovingly. She was anxious and afraid; she spoke soft, pathetic, soothing words to him:

*"Compose yourself, my lord:
Caste off your anger
Like a faded garland
Discarded in the morning.
It rages like a flood!
Sugriva cannot be alone.
He has come with allies.
He can afford to be brave.
Your brother is shrewd,
He attacks from strength.
Prince Angada has warned me.
Be careful, my lord.
I was told by him
Rama and Lakshmana are here.
Settle your quarrel—
Be friends with Rama.
I mean well. Trust me.
Give up anger, live in peace.
Avoid battle with Rama:
He is braver than Indra."*

Wise and beneficial advice, but Vali was destined to self-doom;

he did not listen, determined to meet his death.

Sweet-speaking Tara wept and performed the *svastyayana* ceremony, invoking victory for her husband: she chanted mantras and scattered boiled rice on the ground. Then she returned to her apartments.

Vali bore down on Sugriva, shouting, "I'll knock you dead with one blow of my clenched fist."

The brothers boxed and kicked each other, flailing with fists, knees and feet. Branches cracked and toppled; trees crushed under the crunching impact of their blood-smeared bodies.

Rama saw Sugriva weakening and on the verge of collapse.

*He selected an arrow,
A venomous snake-shaft.
He twanged his bowstring.
Birds and beasts screamed,
Deer fled helter-skelter.
He was the figure of Doom,
Like Kala-chakra.
The arrow like lightning
Flashed forward, smashing
Vali's chest—he wavered,
Fell, choked, perished.
Darkness descended.
Blood-drenched, he lay
Like a sunset-flecked
Sky-fallen cloud,
Like a flameless fire,
Like the sun extinguished
At the end of a yuga.*

Vali, his blood drained, untwitching, unshining, said proudly, keeping dharma in mind:

*"You struck me unfairly.
I was fighting another.
What merit have you gained?
You are high-born and handsome.
'Rama is noble,' they say,*

*'Good, brave, compassionate.'
The virtues of a king are
Dama, shama, kshama, satya,
Sense-control, mind-control,
Forgiveness, truth-speaking;
And patience and dharma.
I thought you had them,
So I fought Sugriva.
'I am fighting another,
Rama will not attack me.'
I was convinced of it,
Though I had never met you.
I was wrong—you
Are your atman-slayer.
You fly the flag of dharma
But behave with adharma.
Your deeds are wicked,
You're a weed-covered well,
You pretend to dharma.
You're really a scoundrel,
Friend outside, foe inside.
I never harmed you,
I never insulted you,
Never invaded your city.
Why did you kill me,
I who am guiltless?
You're a king's son,
But you wear hermit garb—
Why should a warrior
Be such a hypocrite?
Listen to me, Rama:
We are simple folk—
We live in the forest,
We eat roots and fruits.
Land, gold and silver
Are causes of greed—
But who will envy us
Our roots, shoots, and fruits?
You have violated dharma,*

*You have indulged in kama
 By killing me, Rama,
 Who never meant you harm.
 How will you justify yourself
 In front of holy men?
 I should have listened to Tara—
 It was my mistake!
 If you had fought clean.
 You'd be dead, not me.
 You struck me from behind,
 Like a snake a sleeping man.
 And you are the earth's protector!
 You can no more protect the earth
 Than an immoral husband
 Can safeguard his wife's honour!
 You killed me only because
 You wanted to please Sugriva.
 Why didn't you tell me?—
 I'd have brought back Sita
 And restored her to you
 In less than a day.
 And dragged Ravana in chains
 To grovel at your feet.
 The throne was Sugriva's
 After my passing away—
 Now he's a usurper
 Propped up by treachery.
 Death will come when it comes—
 Why should I complain?
 But how will you explain
 Your misdeed towards me?"*

An eloquent speech, full of dharma and pregnant with meaning, harsh but honest—to which Rama replied with these words:

*"You are foolish.
 What do you know of
 Dharma, Artha and Kama
 That you arrogate this right*

*To criticise me as you do?
 Have you consulted your elders,
 Your wise acharyas?
 Don't you know this earth,
 Its mountains and forests,
 Belong to the Ikshvakus?
 They have authority over
 Its beasts, birds, and men.
 Bharata is the Ikshvaku
 With sovereign power
 To reward or punish
 Whom he pleases, when he pleases.
 He knows Dharma and Artha.
 I carry out his commands.
 It's you who have violated dharma
 By pursuing kama and
 Departing from royal rectitude.
 Any follower of dharma
 Respects elder brother, parent, and teacher
 As three equal fathers.
 And younger brother, son,
 And talented pupil are treated
 As three equal sons—
 That's the dictate of dharma.
 But dharma's so subtle
 It's impossible to grasp;
 The ultimate discriminator
 Is one's conscience, which decides
 What's good, what's bad.
 Your counsellors are selfish
 And indisciplined vanaras—
 The blind leading the blind—
 What will they teach you?
 Let me tell you plainly
 Why I have killed you.*

*You're sleeping with your brother's wife—
 This violates eternal Dharma.
 Sugriva is still alive,*

*Yet you have kama for Ruma,
 Who's your sister-in-law.
 This is immoral.
 You have violated dharma
 And indulged in kama—
 And you are well punished.
 I am a high-born Kshatriya—
 I will not tolerate this.
 The man who lusts after
 His daughter, sister, or daughter-in-law
 Is punishable by death.
 Make no mistake about this!
 Sugriva is my friend, as close
 As Lakshmana to me.
 He became my ally
 To recover his wife and kingdom.
 I publicly gave him word.
 How can I go back on it?
 Besides, doesn't Manu say
 'Wrong-doers, after punishment,
 Attain the heaven of good men.
 A raja who fails to punish
 Becomes himself guilty.'
 Judge for yourself, then,
 If you desire death or no.*

*There's still another reason.
 Understand it well
 Before you reproach me.
 Nooses and nets are used
 To trap wild animals
 Whether afraid or defiant.
 Meat-eating hunters
 Pitilessly slaughter them,
 And are not blamed.
 I killed you with
 A single arrow while you
 Were fighting your brother.
 What does it matter*

*Who you were fighting with—
Me or him?—What are you,
But a vanara, a tree-man,
A monkey?*

*Listen, then: rajas dispense dharma,
Rajas make life happy.
Never speak ill of rajas:
They are gods in human form.
Knowing nothing of dharma,
You have dared insult me,
The son of a raja!
I am devoted to dharma.”*

Chastened by Rama’s explanation of the nature of dharma, Vali joined his palms in *anjali* and said:

*“What you say is right.
I am a dwarf,
You a giant.
How can I denounce you?
I was foolish
In saying what I said.
Redeem me, O Rama!
It is not for Tara
That I am worried
Nor for my relatives,
But for my son Angada.
He is my only son,
I love him dearly.
I ask only this—
Protect him, Rama!”*

Rama consoled Vali with the following words filled with the wisdom of dharma and commonsense:

*“Do not worry.
What should be done will be done.
Cast off grief.*

*What is ordained, will be.
What Angada was to you,
He will be to me
And to Sugriva.
I give you my word."*

Gasping heavily, Vali looked around and saw his brother Sugriva standing near him. He whispered gently and affectionately:

*"Sugriva, forgive me.
I lost my head
And did what I did.
We were not fated
To like each other.
Look after Angada,
He is Tara's son.
I give you my golden chain."*

Sugriva accepted the golden chain. Vali, about to die, gazed tenderly at his son Angada and said:

*"Weigh time and place
before you act.
Accept pleasure and pain
with equal strength.
Be obedient to Sugriva
without question.
Avoid excessive fondness
and excessive hate:
Both extremes are wrong—
take the middle path."*

Auguished by the arrow embedded in his flesh, Vali rolled his eyes, and gritted his teeth, and died.

Sugriva's eyes filled with tears. "I am not worthy to be king," he said. "I have done a heinous crime. I have taken the blood of my brother."

Rama consoled him, "Weeping will not give peace to your brother's spirit. Attend to your immediate duties. Condolence is socially correct—and your tears are condolence enough. The time-spirit controls the world's events, the time-spirit determines duties, and guides action. The world is the world; its essence is the time-spirit. The time-spirit neither oversteps its limits, nor declines in any way. It makes no special friends with anyone, and no one can order it away from its course. Dharma, Artha, Kama—everything is subject to the time-spirit Kala. Vali's time is over. Enough of mourning; let us complete the funeral rites."

Rama said to Hanuman, "By the will of my father, I cannot enter a village or city for fourteen years. So let Sugriva be installed king of Kishkindha and let him rule and prosper!"

Sugriva entered Kishkindha and was welcomed with a white, gold-decorated umbrella, two exquisite yak-tail fans with golden handles, gems and jewels, flowers, food-offerings, unguents, garlands, water-blossoms and land-blossoms, perfumes, honey, butter, curds, sandalwood, a tiger-skin and luxurious sandals.

After killing Vali and installing Sugriva king, Rama went to the Malyavan plateau; there he said one day to Lakshmana:

*"The monsoons are here:
Clouds as large as hills
Loom across the sky.
Sucking the ocean waters,
The sky after nine months
Delivers heavy rain.
Golden-thonged lightning
Whips the groaning sky.
Lightning struggles inside
A pitch-dark cloud,
Like Sita in the arms
Of rakshasa Ravana.
Parrot-green grass
Speckled with ladybirds
Is the shining dress
Of the earth-lady.*

*Bees humming,
 Frogs croaking,
 Thunder rumbling —
 The orchestra of rain!
 Sugriva hears joyfully
 The cascading rain,
 But I without Sita
 Am like a crumbling river bank . . .
 I know he will help me.
 I did him a favour,
 He will be grateful.
 Nothing pricks an honest man
 More than ingratitude."*

But Sugriva became increasingly indifferent to duty. His task had been achieved and he surrendered himself to sensual pleasures, specially to dalliance with women.

Hanuman approached him and advised, "You have regained your kingdom. You must now honour your commitments to your friends. First you must please Rama. Order us, and we will search under water or soar skyhigh to carry out your command. There are ten million of us ready to march!"

Sugriva made the supreme decision.

"Summon the entire army here. The crack border guards must report to me immediately. Anyone not reporting within fifteen days will be sentenced to death."

Saying this, Sugriva returned to his palace.

The rainy season ended. Pure, lambent, clear-skyed autumn came.

Sitting on a mountain rock under the sparkling autumn sky, Rama thought:

What must Sita be thinking of now, she who loved to hear the cranes calling and imitated their cries? Do the flowers still look lovely to her, with me not present? I am desolate without her, autumn means nothing to me.

Recalling lotus-eyed Sita, Rama sadly said to Lakshmana:

"The sky is sword-bright.

*The river flows gently,
A breeze whispers to the lotuses.
Caressed by moonlight,
Evening sandhya sheds her veil
In an orgasm of joy.
Night is a young girl
With a full-moon face
Wrapped in a moonlight-mantle.
The rivers are lovely ladies
With silver fish-ornaments
Undulating slowly by
After a night of love-making.
Go to Kishkindha, Lakshmana,
Tell the voluptuary Sugriva
I am offended by his behaviour,
Tell him to honour
The promise he made me,
Or be ready to face
My fatal arrows."*

Instructed by Rama, Lakshmana entered the city of Kishkindha, a splendid cave-surrounded capital.

*Crossing seven courtyards,
Lakshmana came to the
Sumptuous inner apartments.
Strains of sweet songs
Played to the accompaniment
Of stringed instruments . . .
High-born ladies sitting,
Flowers in their hair,
Stringing garlands . . .
Jingling of anklets,
- Tinkling of waist-ornaments . . .
Prevented by embarrassment
From entering the apartments,
Lakshmana from a corner
Twanged his bow-string.
Sugriva trembled*

*And said to Tara:
"Lovely-eyed lady,
It's Rama's younger brother.
Why is he here?
Meet him, placate him,
Then I will face him."
Eyes pink with drinking,
Girdle loosened,
Teetering and swaying,
Tara with bent shoulders
Approached Lakshmana.
In front of a woman,
Lakshmana lowered his eyes.
Heady with wine and
Emboldened by his gentleness,
Tara said seductively:
"Why so angry, prince?
Who has defied you?"
Lakshmana replied courteously:
"Lapped up in lust,
Your husband ignores
Dharma and Artha.
You are his wife—
Why don't you chide him?
His only pursuit
Is indiscriminate kama."
Turning to Sugriva,
Lakshmana said:
"You are false, ungrateful,
You have betrayed Rama.
You're a serpent
Croaking like a frog.
You can't keep a promise.
You're a sick hedonist."
Moon-faced Tara said
To Sumitra's son Lakshmana:
"My lord does not deserve
Such harshness from your lips.
He is not ungrateful,*

*He has betrayed no one.
At the height of his fortunes,
He failed to recall
A promise he once made.
Vishvamitra did the same:
He loved Ghrutachi so much
He thought ten years
Were only a day!
If a holy man like him,
With a sharp sense of time,
Could forget, why blame
An ordinary man?"*

*Lakshmana listened quietly,
And accepted her excuse.
Sugriva, reassured,
Discarded his garland
Like a piece of wet clothing,
And humbly told Lakshmana:
"How can I ever
Return Rama's favour?
I will follow him
Wherever he goes.
Who does not do wrong?
Any mistake I made,
I acknowledge fully,
And ask for forgiveness."*

Saying this, Sugriva ordered Hanuman: "Summon my followers from the mountains—from Mahendra, Himalaya, Vindhya, Kailasa, and Mandara, from Meru and elsewhere. Summon those who live in forests, near ashrams. Summon the lazy and the listless as well. If they are not here within ten days, they die."

*They came, in millions:
From the hills they came,
Where the golden sun sets;
From Kailasa they came,*

*Lion-mane-complexioned,
Fruit-and-root eaters:
From the Himalayas came
Coal-dark tree-men;
From the white sea shores,
From the tamala forests
Came coconut-consumers—
From woods, caves, rivers,
Horde upon horde
Of mighty vanaras—
All the world's tree-folk
Answered Sugriva's call
As announced by Hanuman.*

Sugriva turned to his general Vinata and said, "Take hundreds of thousands of *vanaras* and scour the forests, hills and caves of the east for any sign of Sita. Return after a month. No more—anyone exceeding a month, dies."

Another troop of tree-men was despatched to the south. His father-in-law Sushena was sent west. After Tara's father had been ordered to search in the west, Shatabali was instructed to look for Sita in the north.

Turning to Hanuman, Sugriva said, "You are exceptional. On earth, in air and sky, in heaven, in the undersea world, there is none who can obstruct you, Hanuman. Find a way to reach Sita. You have strength, courage, intelligence, and resourcefulness."

Rama was filled with delight. He gave Hanuman a ring inscribed with his name. "This token will assure Sita you come from me. I know from Sugriva's words and your display of courage that you will succeed."

The *vanara* hordes set out in different directions on their mission of locating Sita.

Vinata searched the eastern territories and returned unsuccessful. From the north returned Shatabali, also unsuccessful.

After one month, Sushena returned from the western region. He had also failed.

Sushena said, "We have all tried and failed. Only Hanuman can

succeed in finding Sita."

Hanuman searched in the southern region, beginning with the Vindhya hills.

He came to the southern ocean, the mirror of the stars of the cosmos.

*There his brave hordes halted.
The vanaras were stupefied.
The sleeping ocean!
The agitated ocean!
The hill-wavy ocean!
The playful ocean!
The monster-filled ocean!
They stood, horripilating.
The uncrossable ocean!
They were despondent.
They wailed in one voice:
"What shall we do?"*

Angada, Bali's son, inspired the despair-stricken, paralysed hordes of Hanuman:

*"Crush despair!
It kills a man
As a snake a baby.
Despair weakens valour,
It's the root of failure,
It's utterly worthless.
Answer me—
Who will cross the ocean?
Who will leap
Four hundred miles?
Come and show yourself!"*

*Gaya said:
"I'll leap a hundred!"
Gavashka said:
"I two hundred!"
And Sharaba:*

"Three hundred!"
Gandhamadana: "Five!"
Mainda: "Six!"
Dvividā: "Seven hundred!"
Sushena: "Eight hundred!"
The oldest, Jambavan,
Said: "Earlier, yes.
I am old now—
I can leap three hundred."

Angada said, "Yes,
I can leap four hundred,
But can I return?
Who knows?"

Jambavan to Hanuman:
"You, excellent vanara,
Why are you silent?
You are Rama's equal
In courage and strength!
The apsara Anjana,
Dressed in a silk
Red-bordered robe,
Was wandering once
On a lonely hill-top;
The wind-god Maruta
Saw her large breasts,
Her thighs touching each other,
Her slender waist,
And fell in love with her.
He enveloped her
In his long arms.
Faithful Anjana cried,
'Who seeks to ravish
The devoted wife
Of a single husband?'
The wind-god replied,
'Not ravish,
Lovely-hipped lady—

*Love.
I have caressed you,
I am in your mind;
You will have a son
Strong and intelligent,
Energetic and noble,
As swift and agile
As me.'*
*You are that child.
When still a baby,
You clutched at the sun,
Thinking it a fruit.
You soared in the sky,
Twenty thousand miles high.
Sunrays scorched you,
You kept flying.
Indra in anger
Hurled his thunderbolt;
You fell,
You fractured your jaw—
Hence your name—
Hanuman,
'The One with the Fractured Jaw'
Thousand-eyed Indra, pleased,
Gave you this boon:
'You will die when you wish to.
Come, Hanuman,
Show your strength!''*

Encouraged by Jambavan, Hanuman, son of the wind-god, expanded his size, preparing himself for the leap across the ocean.

*The vanaras watched.
They shouted.
They praised him.
He waved his tail joyfully.
He was like a lion
At the mouth of a cave,
Like a smokeless fire,*

*Like a blazing oven.
He greeted them all:
"I am the son
Of the hill-shatterer,
Fire's friend Vayu,
The wind-god himself!
My arms churn lakes,
My thighs cross oceans,
I can reach the sun,
Touch stars and planets,
I flash across
Like lightning from cloud,
I shall find Sita,
I shall return."*

He jumped from one peak to another; he crushed the last hill in his embrace; it shattered; waters gushed from rocks; tall trees toppled; deer and elephants panicked and fled; gandharvas abandoned their drinking and love-making; birds screamed; serpents slithered away in fear; the earth was like a traveller in a huge forest, forsaken by his companions.

It was a mind-leap: foe-destroying, swift-speeding Hanuman was already in Lanka.

BOOK FIVE

Sundara-Kanda

(THE AUSPICIOUS BOOK)

Hanuman, the terror of his enemies, decided to follow the aerial path of the wind in order to locate the whereabouts of Sita.

He stood on the plateau like a massive naga in a huge lake.

He expanded his body, like the sea at full moon. He reached out and embraced the rocky hill. He shook the hill, and the trees spattered his frame with fragrant flowers.

Jets of water burst from the hill like rutting juice down the temples of a *musth* elephant.

Hanuman stiffened his arms like two giant maces, and crouched; he drew in his breath, and tensed for the gigantic leap.

He shouted to the forest dwellers, "Like an arrow from the bow of Rama I shoot; I fly like wind towards the capital of Lanka defended by Ravana. I shall find Sita and bring her back. If I fail to find her, I shall drag Ravana here in chains. I shall uproot and lift all Lanka if necessary and bring it here, along with Ravana."

Hanuman leapt into the sky, crashing through *sal* and other trees. His body was spotted with leaves and flowers and shoots and buds, like a sun-flecked cloud, or a hill glittering with fireflies.

He seemed to be drinking up the ocean, he seemed to be swallowing the sky.

He sped across the ocean with the swiftness of thought.

The gods, gandharvas, and perfected sages in heaven approached sun-dazzling Surasa, the mother of the naga serpents, and said :

*"Radiant Hanuman,
The wind-god's son,
Is crossing the ocean.
Delay him, O Surasa.
Become a rakshasi,
Huge as a hill,
With fearful tusks
And red-brown eyes,
As high as the sky.
We'll test his strength,
And see if he routs you
Or flees in despair."*

Flattered by the gods, Devi Surasa emerged from mid-ocean like a horrendously deformed rakshasi. Obstructing Hanuman's

flight, she announced :

*“Finest of vanaras,
The lords of the universe
Have destined that you
Should serve as my food.
This boon was granted
By Brahma to me.
Come, enter my mouth!
Let me devour you!”*

She opened wide her cavernous mouth.

Hanuman smiled and replied, “Dasharatha’s son Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and his wife Sita entered the Dandaka forest. Ravana abducted Sita. I have been sent as Rama’s messenger to Sita. I need your co-operation. But if you insist, then I promise to enter your mouth after I have found Sita.”

Surasa was adamant. “My boon declares,” she said, “that no one shall defy me and live.”

Seeing Hanuman continue his flight, she added, “This is a boon granted by Brahma. You must enter my mouth today.”

Angered, Hanuman said, “Open wide your mouth then! You will need an enormous aperture.”

She opened her jaws thirty miles wide. Hanuman increased his own size correspondingly.

She made it fifty miles—and Hanuman swelled accordingly.

She became sixty, Hanuman seventy. She eighty, Hanuman ninety.

When she opened her mouth a hundred miles, Hanuman shrunk his body to the size of a thumb. Quickly he entered her and as quickly slipped out. Standing clear, he shouted, “*Namaste*, daughter of Daksha! I bow to you—and I take leave of you. Your boon is fulfilled—I have entered your mouth.”

Devi Surasa saw him slide out of her mouth like the moon out of the jaws of Rahu during an eclipse, and said, “Well done, good Hanuman! Go now and accomplish noble Rama’s mission. Restore Sita to him.”

Standing relaxed on the summit of the Trikuta mountain after

crossing the untraversable ocean, Hanuman surveyed Lanka.

Ravana's capital was ringed by a moat in which bloomed lotuses and water-lilies. Since Sita's abduction, it was even more strongly fortified. On every side were fierce rakshasas armed with lethal weapons, and the entire city was surrounded by a golden wall as high as a hill.

Giant Hanuman perched on the northern gate that seemed to touch the sky like Mount Kailasa, and he reflected: *How will mighty Rama ever be able to overcome Lanka? The city is impregnable. The rakshasas refuse to negotiate. They are unbribable. Militarily they are second to none. Only four vanaras can succeed in scaling these walls: Bali's son Angada, Nila, clever Sugriva, and I. But let me first find out whether Sita is alive or not. The other matters can be dealt with later.*

He perched on the top of the northern gate and concentrated on thinking out a plan.

I cannot slip past the guards in my vanara shape. I'll find a suitable ruse at night. These rakshasas are shrewd creatures. Nothing escapes their vigilant eyes. Even the wind cannot slip into Lanka undetected. Let me see—I will reduce myself to a creature the size of a small monkey and wriggle in, and peer into every house in Lanka till I find Sita.

He waited till sunset.

As soon as the sun went down behind the Asta hills, Hanuman shrunk himself into a cat. Late that evening cat-Hanuman slunk along the streets of that magnificent city with its rows of luxurious mansions with golden pillars and gold-lattice-worked windows.

He saw the seven- and eight-storeyed palaces and he knew Sita was somewhere in one of them—and he felt simultaneously sad and glad.

*The moon appeared
With its star-following,
As if to help him
With its luminescence
White as milk,
White as a lotus stalk
The conch-shell moon
Swimming in space*

Like a swan in a lake.

*Hanuman was in Lanka,
The rakshasa capital,
Whose robe was the sea,
Whose ear-rings were cow-pens,
Whose breasts were the forts,
Lady bewitchingly
Beautiful and radiant
In the moonlit night.*

She rose, the Lady of Lanka, the City Deity and, hideously transformed, screamed, "Who are you?"

"I will tell you," Hanuman replied, "but I must first know who you are."

She replied, "The guardian of this city, ordered by noble Ravana to protect Lanka."

"I am a visitor," said Hanuman, "eager to glimpse the beauty of Lanka's groves and turrets and streets."

"You cannot!" she shouted. "This is the city of the rakshasas. You must subdue me first."

She hit him with the flat of her palm.

Hanuman howled in pain. He closed the fingers of his left hand and struck her. Not violently, however, because he said to himself, *She is a woman.*

She fell on the ground.

Her features contorted in gruesome pain.

"Spare me," she moaned. "Oh spare me. I am the spirit of the city of Lanka. Listen to me—I will tell you the truth. Brahma once prophesied, 'The day a *vanara* overpowers you, the rakshasas will no more be invincible. Their doom is near.' Enter the doomed city then, find the chaste Sita, and accomplish your desire."

Lanka:

*A city of golden gates,
Doorways studded with lapis lazuli,
Dust-free inner walls gleaming with crystal,
Gem-inlaid floors*

*With elephant motifs in refined gold,
Silver-worked balconies,
Filigreed stairways,
Assembly halls so high they touched the skies. . .
Peacocks and herons calling,
Swans paddling in serene lakes,
Ornaments tinkling. . .*

Hanuman gazed spellbound.

He saw:

*The brilliant moon move among the stars
Like a rutting bull in a herd of cows.*

He saw:

*The dark-dispelling moon
Sail in the sky like a sin-cleansing god,
Luminously lovely,
Swelling the purifying waters of the ocean,
Shedding splendour
Like the radiance that illuminates Mount Mandara at dusk,
Like a luminescent lotus
Sleeping on the lapping waters of a lake,
Like the silver sheen of a swan
Preening its wings in its cage,
Like a glory-crowned hero atop an elephant,
Like a hump-backed bull with sharp curved horns,
Like a glistening peak of the Himalayas,
Like an elephant with gleaming tusks
Plated with the white gold of the Jambu river,
Like the confident king of beasts emerging from his cave
And gazing below from an overhanging rock,
Like a leader elephant .
Exploring the green darkness of a forest,
Like a ruler of men
Acquainting himself with his kingdom. . .*

*Effulgence overcame evening,
Stirring love in the hearts of lovers.
Soft musical instruments began playing.*

*Virtuous women lay relaxed
In the arms of their husbands . . .*

*Hanuman saw:
Rakshasis caressing their lovers,
Languid women rubbing sandal-paste
On their bodies,
Some asleep,
Some laughing,
Some breathing heavily,
Some, shining with jewellery,
Bashfully blissful,
Mounted by their husbands
As male birds mount female,
Some, devoted to dharma
And conjugal proprieties,
Gracefully ensconced in the laps of their husbands,
Some sprawled naked,
Their skin glowing like gold,
Some, left alone by their husbands,
Elegantly wan in the bright moonlight,
Some, fragrant with flowers,
Happy in their homes, welcoming their lovers . . .
Enchanting women, generously-jewelled,
Row upon row of bright moon-faces,
With curved eyes and eyelashes,
With sidelong glances that flashed
Like streaks of lightning . . .*

*But Sita was nowhere.
There was no trace of Sita,
delicate Sita,
noble Sita,
guided-by-goodness Sita,
Sita like a flowering creeper,
celebrated Sita,
consort of Rama,
Sita who loved Rama,
finest of women,*

*knower of Rama's heart,
lovely-eye-browed lady,
lady of the graceful throat,
blue-throated peahen
roaming in the forest,
single-minded beloved,
celestial lady . . .*

*Without Rama, she pined,
tears wet her breasts,
she was like dust-filmed gold,
a dry scar of a wound,
a wind-scattered cloud.*

*Hanuman could not find her,
And was briefly dejected,
He gave in to despair.*

Powerful Hanuman determined to search for Sita in the magnificent series of palaces in Lanka occupied by Ravana's retinue, including his consorts. Palaces whose lattices were inlaid with cat's-eyes and emeralds. From a distance they glittered like enormous cloud-clusters in the monsoon through which lightning darts in and out with flocks of white cranes simultaneously scudding across the dark-gray coagulations.

He arrived at the palace of Ravana himself—a paradisial paragon with verdurous trees abounding, gem-like flowers surrounding it, and exquisitely beautiful royal ladies enhancing its lustre. It dazzled like a cloud shot through with lightning; it seemed like a celestial chariot pulled by white swans, coursing across the pathways of the sky.

In the palace he saw the huge aerial chariot called Pushpaka on a hill-high platform—like a mountain with gems and minerals glinting on all sides. The “Flower-Vehicle” Pushpaka was studded with bird-motifs of lapis lazuli and snake-designs of silver and coral; the birds opened and contracted their wings mechanically, as pleasing to the eyes of a beholder as the beauty of the love god Kama. Inside the Pushpaka were artificial elephants with shapely lotus-covered trunks squirting scented water on the goddess

Lakshmi seated elegantly in a pool with a lotus in each of her four lovely hands.

A subtle wonder of workmanship by the master artisan of the gods, Vishvakarma, with golden stairways, sapphire balconies, pink sandalwood walls, pearl-white floors . . .

Hanuman inhaled the bouquet of wines and the aroma of appetising food, and the aroma seemed to be seducing him, inviting him as a dear relative calls another, leading him to the heart of the palace of Ravana, whispering, "Come here, come here."

Hanuman followed the irresistible call and entered the inner palace till he came to a spacious, bewitchingly beautiful hall.

He gazed in awe at the golden lamps that flamed with the intensity of defeated gamblers plunged in concentrated thought.

Where am I? he wondered. Is this heaven? Am I in Indra's celestial city? Is this the supreme realm of Brahma?

*On opulent carpets sprawled
Hundreds of ravishing women
In colourful dresses, drowsed
With wine-drinking
And with love-making,
With half the night gone.
They were fast asleep,
Anklet-jewels and girdle-bells
Silent—but shining—
Like a lotus-forested lake
Serene with silent swans
And sleeping bees.*

*Hanuman gazed at the ladies
Lying with eyes closed
And lips shut tight,
Fragrant like lotuses
That close their petals
At evening, until
Dawn comes, ladies
Waiting for love-sick bees
To beg for the fragrance
Of their lotus faces*

Again in the morning . . .

*In that room of Ravana,
The ladies were stars
Spangling an autumn sky,
Radiantly surrounding
Ravana the moon . . .*

*Asleep in their stupor
They lay on the carpets,
Hair dishevelled,
Jewels scattered
During dancing and drinking—
Anklets mislaid, tilak
Marks on foreheads erased,
Necklaces snapped,
Girdle-belts loosened,
Dresses crushed,
Deprived of ear-rings,
Like overloaded mares
Hastily disburdened . . .
Others lay with garlands
Torn and trampled,
Like flowering creepers
Crushed by an elephant . . .*

*Loosened pearl necklaces,
Gleaming like moonlight,
Were swans sleeping
In the space between their breasts;
Cat's-eye necklaces reposed
Like dark-grey kadamba birds;
And gold pendants
Were slumbering chakravakas . . .
The women were rivers,
Their thighs the banks
Where swans and waterfowl
Play amorous games.
Asleep, they were streams,*

*Their girdle-bells ripples,
Their faces lotuses,
Their desires crocodiles,
Their femininity the banks.
And the soft imprints
Of their ornaments on
Their graceful limbs and nipples
Resembled duplicate ornaments
Shaken by their soft breathing;
The ends of their garments
Covering their faces
Undulated, like pennants
Of multi-coloured cloth
Waving imperceptibly.*

*Ravana lay, savouring
The sugar-wine breath
Of his wives; some, in stupor,
Kissed the lips of co-wives
Again and again,
Thinking they were Ravana's;
And the co-wives, passionately
In love with Ravana,
Returned the kisses, imagining
They were kissing their lord.
Some slept, using their
Braceleted arms as pillows,
Others dozed on makeshift
Pillows of folded dresses,
Some reposed on the breasts
Of their co-wives, some
On their laps, some,
In love's intoxication,
On thighs, backs, waists,
And buttocks; some relaxed
With arms interclasped—
A bevy of slender-waisted
Beauties companionably sleeping . . .
Embracing each other they slept*

*Like a garland of flowers
Covered by dark-hair
And dark-nipple amorous bees,
Like a cluster of creepers
Caressed by a spring breeze,
Like a row of trees with
Shoulder-boughs locked and
Black-bee-tresses interlinked.*

*Whose jewels? Whose robes?
Whose garlands? Whose limbs?—
Impossible to tell,
So intimately asleep
Were the wives of Ravana.
Ravana slept. And
While he slept, the lamps
Burning on golden posts
Plucked courage and
Stared with unwinking eyes
At the forbidden beauty
Of the sprawled ladies.
Influenced by kama,
Daughters of royal sages,
Brahmins, Daityas, Gandharvas
Had become wives of Ravana.
Some he had abducted
After defeating their relatives;
Others married him
Out of infatuation.
None was abducted
Without her consent,
None abducted who
Belonged to another,
Or who loved another,
None was low-born,
None unbeautiful,
None crude or unintelligent,
None unadmired
By Ravana of Lanka.*

Hanuman thought:

How lucky would Ravana be
If Sita, Rama's wife,
Were like one of these.
But Sita is superior,
Else why would Ravana
Have wickedly decided
To abduct her to Lanka?

On a magnificent dais, Hanuman glimpsed an ivory-and-gold couch, overhung with flame-of-the-forest blossoms. Women were fanning it with chowries, sprinkling perfumes, and fumigating it with incense. It was covered with sheepskin upholstery, and decorated with a variety of flowers.

*Sitting in the centre
Was Ravana!
Lord of the rakshasas!
Pink-bright eyes!
Sparkling ear-rings!
Dark-cloud-complexioned!
Gold-sheened robes!
Skin smeared with sandal-paste!
Like a sunset cloud
Glinting with lightning!
With celestial ornaments!
Shape-changer at will!
Sleeping like Mount Mandara
Covered with trees and shrubs!
With gems and jewels awry,
Exhausted after a night
Of erotic ecstasies,
Beloved of the rakshasis,
Sleeping on the couch
After feasting and merriment . . .*

Hanuman recoiled.

*He stared respectfully
At Ravana, supine
On his magnificent couch
Like a musth elephant lofty
On the slope of the
Prasavana mountain.*

*Turning, he looked again
At Ravana's wives
Sleeping in their lord's arms .
Slender-waisted beauties—
One embracing her vina
Like a lotus, as if clinging
To a plank in mid-stream,
One with her madduka-drum
In her lap like a mother
With an infant, another
Full-breasted lady hugging
Hard her tambourine
As she might a lover
After long absence,
One beauty in deep sleep
Cupping in two hands
Her gold-pitcher breasts;
Another moon-faced consort
With eyes like lotus petals
Hugging tight her lovely-
Hipped companion . . .
Exquisite beauties, all,
Pressing musical instruments
To their breasts like passion-
Inflamed women do lovers . . .*

On a lavishly decorated couch some distance apart from the love-exhausted, wine-stupefied slumbering women was another lady, slender-waisted fair-complexioned Mandodari, Ravana's favourite queen, as lustrously lovely as *kanaka* gold.

She was sleeping, with all her ornaments on.

Seeing her, so beautiful and dignified and young, Hanuman thought: *This must be Sita!*

He horripilated.

He leapt for joy.

He clapped his arms.

He kissed his tail.

He sang.

He hopped.

He clambered up the pillars.

He fell on the ground.

He was a special simian, after all.

But he immediately dismissed the thought, telling himself: *It cannot be Sita, it must be someone else. Separated from Rama, Sita would not be able to eat, sleep, and adorn herself. She would never touch wine. She would never be intimate with another man, even if he were king of the gods, for who is there among the gods greater than Rama?*

Hanuman passed from room to room, searching for Sita. He visited all the inner apartments of Ravana's palace, peering closely into the fascinating faces of dark-skinned and gold-skinned ladies, drowsy after sexual dalliance, like petal-closed lotuses.

Sita was nowhere.

Gazing at the sleeping women, it suddenly occurred to him: *I have gone against dharma. I have been looking at others' wives asprawl in a state of undress. My dharma will be ruined. I have also gazed on a man who has married the wives of others.*

Then another thought came to him. *True, I have gazed unseen at the wives of Ravana. But no foul feelings entered my heart. What determines right or wrong is motive, and my motive is moral. Where else can I look for Sita if not among women? I cannot look for a woman among a herd of deer. My purpose is pure. But I have yet to see Sita anywhere.*

He said to himself: *One last place remains—the great Ashoka grove. It must be heavily guarded by rakshasas. May the gods grant me success! May Self-Born Brahma favour me! When will I be graced with a glimpse of the faultless, high-born, lotus-eyed lady with finely-pointed nose, white teeth, and sweet smiles, whose face is*

more enchanting than the cloudless moon?

It was spring in the Ashoka grove. The earth, draped in a shower of flowers fallen from trees, glittered like a bride adorned with jewels.

Hanuman saw a hill, dotted with caves, as lustrous as a white cloud—a captivating spectacle. He saw a stream rushing down the hill like a young girl bashfully slipping out of her lover's embrace; and the tree branches that brushed the cascading stream were her friends imploring her to stay back; further down, the waterfall swirled softly into a gentle flow, as if petulance had agreed to reconciliation.

Hanuman saw trees as bright as flames. He saw a giant Ashoka on a golden mound. Its buds and shoots and leaves, stirred by the soft wind, tinkled like tiny bells on the girdles of ladies.

This is the ideal place for Sita, thought Hanuman. If that moon-faced devi is alive, she cannot fail to visit this grove of flowering trees and cool streams.

So mahatma Hanuman swung up the Ashoka tree and concealed himself in the luxuriant foliage and flowers, keeping a vigil for the appearance of Sita.

*He saw a woman,
Ringed by rakshasis.
She was weak through fasting,
She sighed again and again.
She shone like the crescent moon
In the bright fortnight's first quarter,
Indistinct, obscured,
Like a smoke-dimmed flame.
No ornaments.
Soiled yellow robe.
A muddy lotus-pond
Bereft of lotuses.
Her face wet with tears.
Anxious and exhausted.
A hound-pursued doe.
Long hair gliding*

*Down to her thighs
Like a black serpent.
She looked like the earth
With rows of dark-blue forests
After the monsoon.*

*Hanuman, seeing her,
Guessed her to be Sita.
She has the same form
As the lady abducted
By Ravana, and seen
By my fellow tree-men.*

*Full-moon face,
Exquisite eyebrows,
Graceful large breasts,
Dark-dispelling nimbus,
Peacock-blue throat,
Bimba-fruit lips,
Slender waist,
Symmetrical limbs,
Lotus-petal eyes,
The peer of the goddess of love,
As lovely as the moon
And loved by all.*

*She sat on the ground
Like a female ascetic
Practising tapasya
In a net of grief,
Like a sacred text
Misinterpreted,
Like wealth squandered,
Like faith shattered,
Like hope frustrated,
Like ideals impeded,
Like intellect corrupted,
Like fame blackened.*

Hanuman thought:

Yes, it must be Sita.

Rama described her ornaments

To me when I left.

I can see the armlets

Filmed with dust.

The colour of her robe

Though soiled still shines,

As does her beauty.

This is the lady

For whom Rama suffered,

Passing through the range of

Pity, tenderness, grief, and love:

Pity for a lady

Whom he failed to protect,

Tenderness for a woman

So dependent on him,

Grief at losing

His own wife, and

Love for a beloved

So suddenly lost.

Her grace, her beauty

Resemble his; this dark-

Eyed lady is Rama's wife.

She thinks of him only,

He thinks only of her;

So, strengthened by dharma,

She survives. Miraculous

That Rama, without her,

Has not died of grief.

He watched her from the vantage

Of the Ashoka tree.

The moon rose like a bunch

Of water-lilies, sailing

In the spotless sky like

A swan in a blue lake.

To make him see clearly,

The bright-shining moon

*Bathed the Ashoka grove
 With translucent, cool light.
 Hanuman saw Sita
 Grief-stricken, foundering
 Like an overloaded boat.
 He saw rakshasis
 Guarding her—horrendous monsters,
 Some with one eye,
 Some with one ear,
 Some without ears,
 Some with nose s embedded
 In the centre of their foreheads,
 Some balding, some hirsute
 Like a woollen blanket,
 Some knock-kneed, stunted,
 Humpbacked, mouths awry,
 Eyes bloodshot, some tall,
 Gruesome to look at,
 Some with elephant feet,
 Snouts of bears,
 Faces of camels,
 Goats, jackals, horses,
 Some with heads in breasts.
 But Hanuman was happy—
 He had seen Sita,
 He wept tears of joy,
 And remained concealed
 In the Ashoka tree.*

So the night passed, with Hanuman invisible in the Ashoka tree and keeping faithful vigil. Early at dawn he heard the chanting of the Vedas by Brahmin rakshasas learned in the Vedas and in the six auxiliary sciences of grammar, prosody, astronomy, pronunciation, etymology, and rituals.

Ten-headed Ravana, lord of the rakshasas, woke to the ear-soothing strains of musical instruments and formal praise of the sovereign. His robes and garlands were in disarray.

He thought of Sita.

Kama had possessed his heart; his mind was still inflamed with drink; he could not suppress his sensual longing for the princess of Videha.

He strode straight towards the Ashoka grove which was redolent with fruits and flowers, and lotuses and lilies, and birds mating in all seasons, and sportive deer.

One hundred ladies, daughters of gods and gandharvas, with golden lamps and chowrie-fans in their hands, followed him. Lovely ladies, tipsy with wine and drowsy with slumber, trailing their lord like flashes of lightning behind a cloud. Their tresses were loose; perspiration had made their garlands soggy; but, filled with pride for their lord and curious to get a glimpse of Sita, they stumbled and shuffled and swayed behind Ravana.

Ravana, overcome by kama and stubbornly set on Sita, proceeded to the Ashoka grove.

Hanuman heard the jingling of ladies' girdle-bells and anklets.

Turning, he saw Ravana majestically striding and adjusting his flower-embroidered cloak, which had got entangled in his armlet. It was a dazzling-white garment, like the pure-white *amrita* obtained from the churning of the primeval ocean.

Overshadowed by the grandeur of Ravana, Hanuman prudently concealed himself behind a dense cluster of leafy boughs.

Eager to meet dark-eyed, dark-haired, graceful-limbed Sita whose breasts touched each other, Ravana hurried his pace.

Sita saw Ravana.

He was young and strong.

Rich-robed and ornamented.

She trembled like a plantain tree

Shaking in a storm.

She covered her breasts with her arms.

She shielded her waist with her thighs.

She sat and wept.

Rakshasis guarded her.

She was a frail boat

Tossing on an ocean,

She sat on the bare ground

Like a felled branch of a tree.

She swayed to and fro

*Like the queen of snakes
Under the spell of an incantation.
She was a reputation ruined,
A faith discarded,
An intelligence enfeebled,
A hope disillusioned.
A future frustrated,
An oblation spurned,
A lotus blighted,
An army routed,
Sunlight obscured,
A stream dried up,
An altar desecrated,
A flame extinguished . . .*

*Ravana approached Sita,
Helpless Sita,
Wretched Sita,
Sita surrounded by rakshasis,
And said:
“Why are you afraid of me,
Lady with thighs as shapely
As an elephant’s trunk?
Why do you cover your breasts
And your waist?
I love you,
I am stricken with kama for you,
O large-eyed beauty!
Favour me, beloved, priyé,
For you are lovely
And all the world loves you.
There are no men here,
And no rakshasas able
To change shape at will.
Do not be afraid, Sita.
It is rakshasa dharma
To rape others’ wives
Or abduct them in combat—
This has always been so.*

*But I promise you, Sita,
I will not touch you
Till you feel the kama for me
That I feel for you.
It would be easy for me
To indulge my kama,
But trust me, devi,
And discard your fear,
Give up your grief,
Reciprocate my love.
It is not right that you
Should do a single plait,
Lie on the bare ground,
Go about in tattered dress,
And fast uselessly.
When you become mine,
You will have garlands,
Sandal-paste, perfumes,
Celestial ornaments,
Soothing drinks,
Luxurious beds and couches,
Music and singing and dancing.
O jewel among ladies,
Wear jewels once again!
Once you accept me,
What will you ever lack?
Youth passes, lovely lady.
Your stubbornness is folly.
For you, lady of delight,
I will conquer the world
To give to your father.
For who dares defy me?
The gods and anti-gods
Failed to defeat me—
I toppled their flagstaffs
And routed their armies.
Come, please me.
Wear gorgeous robes,
Flaunt dazzling jewels.*

*Charusmité,
Sweet-smiling one,
Lovely-eyed beauty,
You have stolen my heart
As Garuda steals a snake.
Your dress is in rags,
You have no ornaments—
Yet your presence delights me
More than my wives.
Enjoy life with me,
Depend on me,
And let your relatives
Enjoy life too.
Wear gold necklaces,
And roam with me
On the shores of the sea
Where black bees hum
In the flowering trees.”*

*Tormented Sita replied
Gently and sadly.
To avoid contact
With Ravana, she placed
A blade of dry grass
Between him and herself;
Then, lovely-limbed Sita,
Sobbing and simultaneously
Smiling sweetly, said:
“Forget me.
Return to your wives.
Be satisfied with them.
I am not for you,
Just as perfection is not
For a wrong-doer.
I am nobly born,
I am piously married,
I cannot do
What a devoted wife
Should never do.”*

*She turned her back
On Ravana, and continued:
“I am another’s wife,
How can I be yours?
Follow good dharma,
Follow the example
Of men of good dharma.
O night-prowler, consider—
You protect your wives,
Protect others’ wives too.
Set a good example—
Be happy with your wives.
The fool who, dissatisfied
With his wife, seeks pleasure
With others’ wives, is ruined.
Are there no good men here—
Or do you perversely
Reject what is good?
Why are you ignoring
The wisdom of the wise?
Why are you bent
On the ruin of the rakshasas?
Whole kingdoms and cities
Perish when their ruler
Becomes the slave of his senses.
Lanka is doomed.
You cannot tempt me
With power and riches.
I am to Rama
As sunlight to sun.
Restore me to Rama
As a she-elephant
In heat to her mate
In a large forest.
Rama is my protector.
It will not be long
Before he and Lakshmana
Will shoot arrows that suck
Your life-breath, like sunlight*

*Sucking dry a shallow pool.
Cajole Kubera,
Run to Varuna—
You cannot escape.
Rama will destroy you,
Like lightning a tree."*

*Sita's masculine words
Made Ravana retort:
"The gentler a man,
The sooner women respond.
That's the normal way.
With you, the gentler I am,
The more you repulse me.
It's a good thing my kama
Controls my anger,
Just as a charioteer
Curbs unruly horses.
Strange is kama—
The more a beloved
Makes a lover angry,
The more he showers her
With gentle affection.
You can see, lovely lady,
Why I do not kill you,
Though death and dishonour
Are what you deserve.
Such self-denial!"
He added excitedly:
"You have two months left
Of the twelve I promised.
After that, soft-skinned lady,
You must share my bed.
Should you still refuse,
I will have you chopped
And my cooks will serve you
As my morning meal."*

Encouraged by the glances of Ravana's wives, Sita refused

Ravana, and rebuked him in their presence for misbehaviour. Then Ravana turned to the rakshasi guards, and ordered, "Do this quickly—do it any way you like—by persuasion or coercion, by gifts or by torture—submit Sita to my will!"

He shouted at Sita in a fury of kama and anger.

One of the rakshasis, Dhanyamalini, rushed and embraced him, saying, "Enjoy me, maharaja! Why do you need this pale and pathetic human creature to amuse yourself with? The gods have destined your powerful arms to hold more subtle pleasures than she can provide. By having kama for someone who does not have kama for you, you will suffer; by having kama for a woman who has the same kama for you, you will experience exquisite delight."

She tried to pull him to herself, but Ravana burst out laughing.

The ten-headed lord of the rakshasas strode back to his palace. The ground shook under the impact of his footfalls.

With Ravana gone, the rakshasi guards surrounded Sita and began violently threatening and abusing her.

A rakshasi called Harijata rolled her calf's eyes and screamed, "He has routed thirty-three gods and their king in battle—and you refuse to be the wife of this never-defeated hero!"

Another named Durmukhi shouted, "Why won't you be the wife of the raja of rajas? At his command trees scatter flowers, and hills and the clouds release torrents of rain. The sun does not shine and the wind does not blow if to do so displeases Ravana. Listen to us, sweet-smiling devi, or face death."

Another ferocious rakshasi, brandishing a huge spear, said, "You are young, you have the eyes of a doe, your breasts are bouncing with fear . . . I have an irresistible desire to feast on your liver and spleen, your luscious breasts, your heart, your veins, your head. Oh yes!"

The rakshasi Ajamukhi said, "Let's chop her up, and divide her into equal bits. I hate squabbling. Order drinks and garlands!"

Another rakshasi, Shurpanakha, interrupted, "Ajamukhi's right. Order wine! Let's have an orgy! Let's have a feast of human flesh and dance in the grove of the goddess Bhadrakali!"

Sita, lovely lady as gracious as the daughter of a god, unable to endure the taunts, broke down and cried.

Seeing Sita tormented, an elderly rakshasi, Trijata, who was prudent, warned the others, "Wretches, go devour yourselves! How dare you threaten Sita, Janaka's daughter and Dasharatha's dear daughter-in-law? I had a hair-raising nightmare yesterday which predicted the destruction of rakshasas and the victory of Sita's husband.

"I saw a celestial vehicle, it was made of ivory, it was pulled by a thousand horses, it flew in the sky, and riding in it, dressed in white, were Rama and Lakshmana, wearing white garlands. I saw Sita too, she was dressed in white, and she was standing on a white mountain in the middle of the sea; I saw her united with Rama as light unites with the sun. I saw Rama scintillating with glory, astride a huge four-tusked elephant as high as a hill, and with him was Lakshmana, and the two of them were wearing white garlands and they were dressed in white, and they were both a dazzling burst of white, they were shining like two suns, and they came and stood near Sita. And Sita actually mounted the shoulders of the elephant which her husband was riding and they seemed to be both as tall as the white hill. The lotus-eyed lady suddenly stood up in the lap of her husband and reached out and stroked the sun and the moon. After which, the magnificent elephant with the two princes and large-eyed Sita advanced towards Lanka.

"In another dream I saw Rama dressed in brilliant white, and with him was Lakshmana, and Sita too; and they were riding in a chariot pulled by eight bullocks.

"And I saw Ravana too, in another dream, and his head was shaven, and his body was smeared with oil, and he was dead drunk and still kept on drinking, and he was garlanded with oleanders, and he lay askew on the ground after falling from his aerial chariot Pushpaka. I saw him again, this time also with a shaven head, dressed in black, with a crimson garland, smeared with sandal-paste, and a woman was clawing at him while he rode in a chariot drawn by asses."

Sita, rejoicing at the prospect of her husband's victory, said to Trijata, "If all this comes true, I shall always be your friend."

Like willing servants eager to attend on a prosperous man, auspicious omens appeared on the body of irreproachable yet suffering Sita.

The large left eye of lovely-haired Sita with its dark pupil began

to twitch, as a lotus when brushed by a flickering fish.

Her symmetrical, well-fleshed left arm, which, scented with black aloe and sandal-paste, had served as a pillow for her husband, began to throb gently.

Of her thighs, which touched each other, the left one, as graceful as the tapering trunk of an elephant, palpitated involuntarily, as if Rama were standing in person in front of her.

The end-covering of the golden, now dust-covered, dress of large-eyed Sita whose teeth were as pretty as pomegranate seeds, slipped a little from her shoulders.

Comforted, her grief and exhaustion dissipated, her fever allayed, her heart brimming with joy, Sita looked as entrancing as the cool-rayed moon risen during the bright fortnight.

Hanuman listened to every word spoken in the Ashoka grove by Sita, Trijata, and the rakshasis.

He stared hard at that devi from the Nandana gardens of Indra's heaven, and many thoughts passed through his mind.

Thousands of monkeys searched for her, and I have finally found her. I must now comfort her, for she is pining for her husband, the immeasurably powerful and all-compassionate Rama. But how will I approach her without producing fear in her?

He pondered this carefully and decided: *I shall sing the praises of Rama. That can never frighten her, for her mind is absorbed in the glory of her husband. If I sweetly convey the dharma-filled message of Rama, Sita will listen to me. I will be as melodious and persuasive as I can.*

From the secrecy of his bough-hidden perch in the tree, Hanuman spoke these sweet and sensible verses so as to reach Sita's ear:

*"His name was Dasharatha,
A raja of renown,
Noble and compassionate,
Of famed Ayodhya town.
His eldest son was Rama,
The darling of his heart,
Enchanting as the full moon*

*And skilled in every art,
 Protector of his people,
 Upholder of his word,
 The terror of his foes,
 And dharma's faithful lord.
 Commanded by his father,
 Obedient Rama went
 With Sita and with Lakshmana
 To forest-banishment.
 When Rama killed the rakshasas
 With which the woods were rife,
 Infuriated Ravana
 Abducted Rama's wife.
 In his search for Sita,
 Rama has a friend
 Sugriva, on whose orders
 I run from end to end,
 Leaping over oceans,
 Mountainously wavy,
 Till I succeed in finding
 The lotus-lovely devi.
 Now at last I've found her!
 Oh, the signs are clear!
 Her grace, her charm, her sweetness!
 She is here, she is here!"*

Bewildered, Sita brushed aside her dishevelled hair and looked up at the Ashoka tree.

She turned and peered curiously in all the four directions, her whole being pulsating with memories of Rama.

She glanced from side to side; she looked up and down.

Suddenly she caught a glimpse of Hanuman, Sugriva's minister, squatting in the tree like the risen sun.

Startled, she gasped, "It's a *vanara*! Aho, it's one of the fierce tree-dwellers!"

Distracted, lovely Sita moaned, "Rama! Rama! Lakshmana!"

In a faint voice she murmured, "I must be dreaming."

Clambering down the Ashoka tree, coral-faced Hanuman humbly approached Sita and, palms joined in *anjali*, said gently, "Devi,

I am a messenger. My name is Hanuman. I bring news of Rama. He is well. He enquires of your welfare."

Shaking with relief and delight, Sita said, "What they say is true — 'It may take a hundred years coming, but joy surely comes to every man.' "

Hanuman suggested to Sita, "Climb on my back, devi, and I will take you back to Rama. I will fly over the ocean. No one in Lanka will dare pursue us. I shall take the same route back that I took coming here."

Excited, Sita asked, "How will you carry me over so great a distance, Hanuman? Is this a monkey-trick? How is it possible? You are so small."

Hanuman thought: *How poorly she thinks of me! She has no idea of my strength. I must show her that I can assume any form at will.*

He began to expand his body till it swelled to the gigantic size of Mount Meru or Mount Mandara. He stood in front of Sita, like a bloated flame. His body was gargantuan and copper-coloured, his nails and teeth were like flint.

"If I so wish, I can carry off Lanka with all its hills, forests, market-places, arches, and ramparts," he boasted, "and Ravana as well! Be calm, devi, and decide. Come with me and remove the sorrow of Rama and Lakshmana."

Seeing the son of the wind-god swell to mountain-size, lotus-eyed Sita replied, "I now see that you are indeed capable of carrying me away from here. But I must think of the consequences. I do not think it is right that I should go with you. Supposing your wind-swift speed makes me giddy and I tumble off your back into the shark-and-crocodile-infested sea? I cannot go with you. You will be in danger. The rakshasas will rally and attack you, and when you engage in combat with them, what will happen to me? What will I do? Besides, I am totally devoted to my husband, and I do not wish to touch any man other than my husband. When Ravana abducted me and touched me, I was helpless, I had no choice. And think—how marvellous a feat it would be if Rama came and killed Ravana and rescued me! That would be an exploit worthy of his heroism!"

Sita added, "Return to Rama, and tell him from me—'I have only one more month to live. I swear to you that this is the truth. Rescue me from the clutches of wicked-working Ravana,

as Vishnu rescued the goddess earth from the underworld of Patala.' ”

She untied from her dress the celestially shining pearl which once graced her forehead and handed it to Hanuman.

“Give this to Rama,” she said.

Hanuman placed the jewel on his finger, respectfully half-circled Sita from left to right in *pradakshina*, and prepared for his return journey.

“Before I leave,” he declared, “I shall reduce to a shambles this eye-enchanted grove of Ravana which rivals the Nandana grove of Indra’s heaven. I will destroy every tree, bush and creeper in it, as a forest fire consumes trees to ashes. Let Ravana rage! Let him do his worst!”

Like a restless tempest, valiant Hanuman set about crushing the trees with his muscular thighs, trampling them with his feet, and uprooting them with his hands.

The creepers were twisted, the trees smashed, the tops of mounds shattered, the pools splattered with copper-coloured buds—the Ashoka grove was laid waste. The mangled creepers with their scattered blossoms swayed limply in the wind like women in various stages of undress and disarray.

Ordered by Ravana, the Indra of rakshasas, the seven sons of his chief minister marched out of the palace to combat Hanuman. They led a massive army consisting of gold-plated horse-pulled chariots that rattled with a thunderous din, and heroic warriors armed with golden bows that dazzled like lightning.

They rushed in a body at Hanuman who stood near the palace gates.

He skilfully evaded their swarms of arrows. With a deafening scream he leapt in their midst, sending some reeling with blows and rendering others unconscious with fierce kicks, gouging others with his nails, hitting out with chest and thighs, spreading horror and panic as streams of blood trickled over the main highway of Lanka from the twitching and mangled bodies of horses, elephants, and dying rakshasas.

Routing the hordes, Hanuman again stationed himself at the gates, poised to repulse a second attack.

Ravana's son, young Aksha, thundered out in a chariot pulled by eight thought-swift horses. Hanuman, with one sweep of his gigantic arm, immobilised the horses. The chariot overturned, completely smashed.

Aksha, bow and sword in his hands, jumped out of his toppled vehicle as if rushing into the sky, like a *rishi* ascending to heaven after quitting his body by the power of his yoga.

Hanuman with a single leap clutched at his legs, as Garuda grips a snake, and spun him round fiercely before dashing him into a crumpled heap on the ground.

His chest fractured, his thighs smashed, his bones and eyes reduced to pulp, Aksha vomited blood and died.

Enraged but holding his fury in check, Ravana summoned his eldest son Indrajit who was like a god, and said to him, "You have no equal in warfare. You have routed even the gods and anti-gods. You have received divine weapons from Brahma himself. You have defeated even Indra. Act quickly, my son, and prevent further carnage. Brute strength will not prevail against Hanuman. Do what you think best to subdue this mysterious enemy."

Indrajit respectfully did *pradakshina* by half-circling his father, and marched out to do battle against Hanuman.

Swarm upon swarm of arrows failed to wound Hanuman, who sidestepped every missile hurled at him. It was impossible to surprise him.

Indrajit concentrated his mind on how to paralyse Hanuman, for there seemed to be no weapon strong enough to kill him.

He fitted the Brahma-missile to his bow and fired it point-blank at Hanuman.

The impact of the celestial weapon knocked Hanuman semi-conscious. Because it was a weapon blessed by Brahma, Hanuman felt no pain at all.

He thought: *This is a missile that is propelled by mantras, but I have a boon from Brahma too that will release me from its effects in a short time. I cannot release myself from its power, but I have nothing to fear. I will allow myself to be made captive. Pitamaha Brahma, Indra and the Wind-God my father will protect me. This way I will get a chance to meet Ravana face to face. It is no bane but a blessing.*

Trussed with hemp ropes, Hanuman was dragged before Ravana.

By this time the paralysis of the Brahma-missile had worn off, but Hanuman gave no hint that he was in full possession of his senses and his strength.

The fierce rakshasas shouted: "Who is this? What is he doing here? From where has he come?"

Others screamed: "Kill him! Roast him! Eat him!"

Ten-headed Ravana ordered his ministers to question Hanuman.

Hanuman said, "I am a messenger, I have been sent by Sugriva, lord of tree-dwellers."

Looking straight at Ravana, he said fearlessly, "Your brother-in-royalty Sugriva wishes your welfare. Noble-minded Sugriva sends you this message of dharma and prosperity. Raja Dasharatha's son is Rama. His wife Sita, daughter of Janaka, was abducted from the forest. Rama killed Bali with a single arrow and placed Sugriva on the throne. Out of gratitude and loyalty, Sugriva has sent me to search for Sita. I am Hanuman, and I have found Sita in your palace grounds.

"You are wise, you are known for dharma and *artha*, and it is not honourable that you should run away with another's wife. There is no power in the three worlds, among the gods or the rakshasas, that can defy the might of Rama. Let dharma and self-interest guide you now—restore Sita to her husband Rama. I have seen her here, she is in the grip of grief. O king of the rakshasas, no one, not even Self-Born Brahma, or Three-Eyed Shiva, or Indra can face Rama in battle."

His eyes rolling in anger, ten-headed Ravana ordered Hanuman put to death.

Vibhishana said gently to his elder brother Ravana, "Forgive me, my lord, but you are well-versed in dharma. It is against dharma to take the life of a messenger."

Ravana shouted furiously, "There is no blame in killing an evil-doer."

Vibhishana heard these words of adharma and replied, "Listen to me, my lord, for I shall state clearly what conduces to dharma and self-benefit. This *vanara* has done harm, I admit. But on no condition is it permissible to execute a messenger: this is the considered verdict of the wise. Torture him, shave off his hair, whip him—but you cannot kill him. It is unheard of! Punish those who sent him. Honest or dishonest, he is only an emissary. Show some

nobility, my lord, for it is worthy of your name."

Ravana said, "You are right. But he must be punished. Set fire to his tail, and parade him through the streets of Lanka!"

The horrendous rakshasas swathed Hanuman's tail in cotton rags dipped in oil, and set fire to them. He lashed his tail furiously. Old men and women and children clustered around him, enjoying the spectacle.

Hanuman, mightiest of *vanaras*, thought: *Why should a warrior like me allow himself to be roped and reviled by these rakshasas? I will not suffer it any more!*

In an instant he broke free by flexing his body, screamed piercingly, and with a colossal jump reached the palace gates. Picking up an iron club lying on the ground, he struck at the guards, killing them.

He stood still, tall as a mountain, and surveyed the city of Lanka.

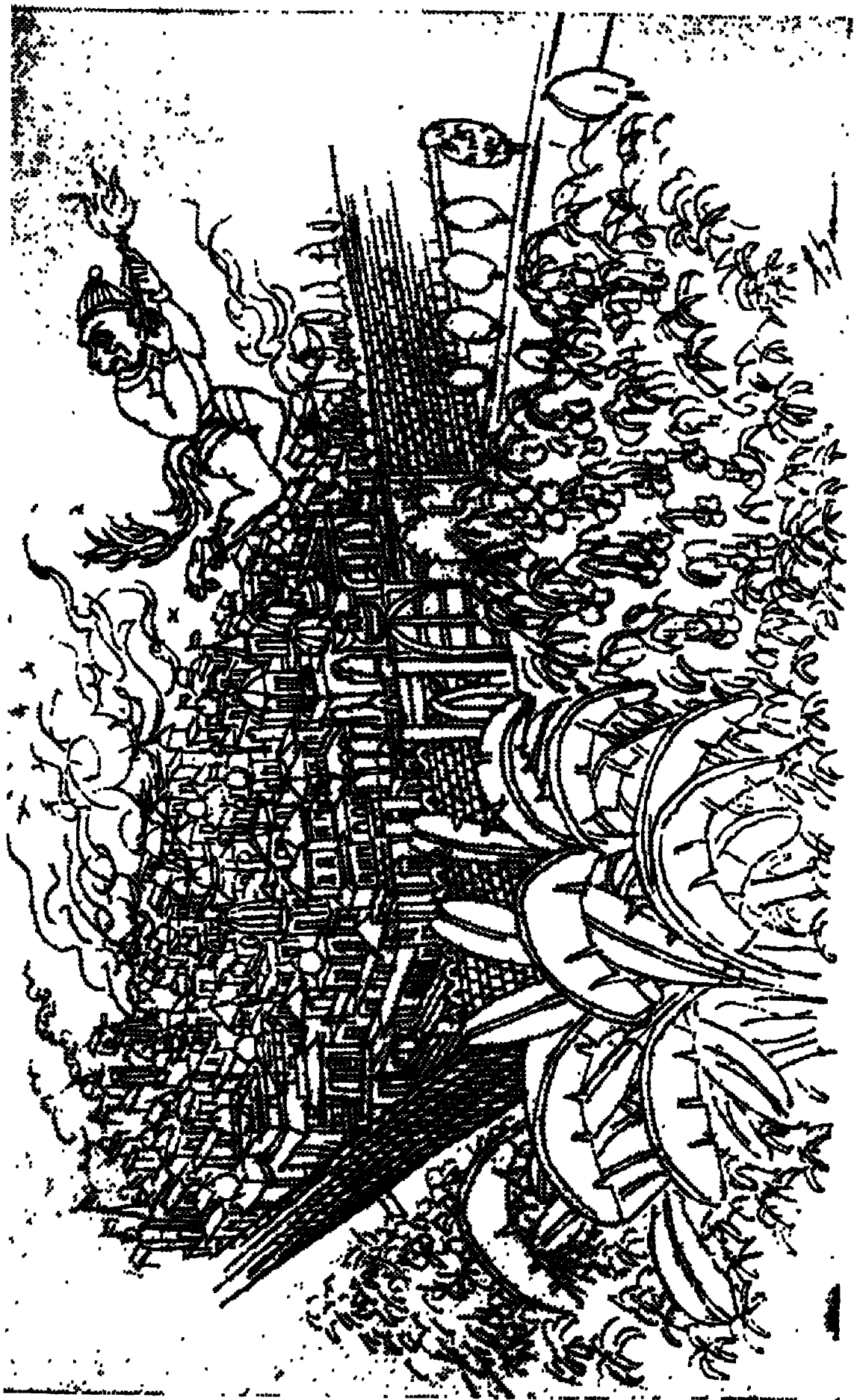
He thought: *What more should I do to harass the rakshasas? I have destroyed their grove, killed the pick of their warriors, and spread panic in the palace. What remains is the fort. I will demolish the fort. My tail is on fire—I will reverse the flaming bearer of sacrificial offerings on it by feeding him these splendid mansions of Lanka.*

With his tail burning brightly like a torch, Hanuman bounded from roof to roof like a cloud charged with lightning.

He set fire to the dwellings of Rashmiketu, Suryashatru, Hrasvakarna, Damshttra, Romasha, Yuddhonmatta, Dhvajagriva, Vidyujihva, Hastimukha, Vishala, Kumbhakarna, Narantaka, Nikumbha, Yajnasatru, Brahmashatru, and others.

And soon, the wind-fanned flames spread swiftly through the city, as vivid a conflagration as the fires of Kala on the day of dissolution. The pearl-and-gem encrusted palaces crackled and crumbled, and cacophonous wails echoed through the city, "It's the god of fire himself! He is ravaging the city in the form of a monkey!"

*An incredible holocaust
Shooting to the sky!
Tongues of fire like
Flames-of-the-forest!
Clouds of smoke like*



*A gigantic blue lotus!
Scarlet splendour!*

And a clamour rose on all sides, voices of grief and agony and lamentation: "Hai father!" "Hai my dear son!" "Hai my friend!" "Hai my religious merit is exhausted!"

Hanuman heard the screams and moans and saw the flames consuming Lanka and was filled with great apprehension.

He thought: *It's a terrible deed. I have done—setting fire to Lanka. Blessed are the mahatmas whose wisdom cools their anger, as water quenches fire. What cannot an angry man do?—He can kill even a guru, he can insult a saint. Only he is fit to be called a man who can cast off his anger as a snake sloughs off its skin. I completely forgot about Sita! If she perishes in the fire which consumes Lanka, I will be responsible for killing my master as well. I have spoilt everything! And all because I lost my head!*

Then he recalled some auspicious signs and reflected:

No, the lovely-limbed lady cannot perish in the fire. Her radiance will protect her. The purity of her character is her safeguard. How can this fire, which could not burn even my tail, consume her? The strength of her tapasya, her truth, her devotion to her husband will consume fire itself. Fire cannot touch her.

Thinking this, he leapt into the air, soaring over the wave-lashed salty sea.

He flew, a winged mountain, impetuous and untiring, through the sky-sea where the star Svati shines like a swan and the rays of the moon are cool waves.

Reaching the wooded slopes of Mount Prasravana, Hanuman touched the feet of Rama and Lakshmana with his head. He bowed to Sugriva, and narrated his experiences in the ladies' inner apartments of Ravana's palace, Sita's confinement, her harassment by the rakshasis, her unswerving devotion to Rama, and the time she had allowed herself for survival.

Hanuman continued, "She said to me, 'Give this jewel to Rama; I have preserved it carefully. Remind him of the sacred vermilion which he placed on my forehead. Tell him when I look at this pearl from the heart of the sea, I see his face in it, and I am con-

soled. Tell him I will live only for one month more, and if he does not rescue me by then, I have no desire to continue living.' These were her words to me; I have repeated them faithfully to you."

Rama pressed the jewel to his heart. His eyes filled with tears, and he said to Sugriva:

*"As milk from a cow's udders
When she sees her calf,
So in my heart tenderness
Gushes on seeing this jewel,
Given on Sita's marriage
By my father-in-law
To wear on her forehead."*

Turning to Hanuman, he said, "Repeat the words of Sita to me, Hanuman. They are like reviving water sprinkled on the face of a fainted man. They are like medicine to a sick man. What did my sweet-behaving, and sweet-looking wife say to you? How has she been able to live through her calamity?"

Hanuman replied to noble-minded Rama, "Finest of men, the devi Sita recalled an incident and described it to me. It happened in Chitrakuta. She was sleeping happily by your side one day, and she woke up first. Without warning a crow darted at her and pecked at her breast. You were sleeping with your head in the devi's lap. The vicious crow continued to peck at her till her breast was dripping with blood. You were sleeping peacefully, but she could not bear it any more, and she shook you awake. Seeing her breast wounded, you asked, 'Who has bloodied your breast with his nails? Who is the fool who dares play with a five-headed snake?'

"Looking around, he spotted the sharp-taloned crow not far from you. The crow was actually Jayanta, son of Indra, and swift as wind he vanished inside the earth. With your eyes rolling in anger, you vowed to kill the crow. You picked up a blade of kusha grass and infused it with the mystic incantation of the Brahma-weapon; it burst into flame like the fires of Kala at the dissolution of the universe and traced a fiery path in the wake of the crow.

"The gods in their fear abandoned the crow, and he could find no one in the three worlds to protect him. So he scuttled back to you and threw himself at your mercy. He fell prostrate on the

ground in front of you. He deserved death, but you pardoned him. But because the Brahma-weapon, once discharged, cannot be recalled, you blinded his right eye. Offering namaskaras to you and Raja Dasharatha, the crow returned to its dwelling.

“Sita said: ‘Why is it, O Rama, that you, who are expert in all weapons, refuse to use them against the rakshasas? What a terrible crime I must have committed that the two great foe-tormentors, who have it in their power to help me, refuse to unite and come to my rescue!’

“This is what Sita said to me. Sita, devoted wife, is well. Have faith in her virtue. She said: ‘If Rama kills Ravana in battle and returns with me to the capital in triumph, that will be a feat worthy of his glory. He must not stealthily spirit me out of Lanka. Let him destroy Lanka and free me! Oh Hanuman, act in such a way that the valour of noble Rama finds full play. Let the world witness my husband’s prowess!’”

BOOK SIX

Yuddha-Kanda

(W A R)

Rama listened with delight to the faithful report of Hanuman and said, "Hanuman has done a rare and remarkable feat—something no one else could have achieved, even in thought. It pains me that I am unable to reward the bearer of such good news. All I can give him now that is my own is an embrace."

Affectionately, Rama clasped Hanuman and pressed him to his heart.

Then, turning to Sugriva, he said, "At least we now know where Sita is. And yet as I look at this vast ocean, I feel strangely depressed. How will our army ever reach the other side of the formidable expanse of water? What shall we do now?"

Sugriva consoled despondent Rama with these words: "Brave hero, why have you fallen prey to weakness like any ordinary man? Shake off this paralysing grief! Let us start work immediately on a bridge that will take us to the heart of Lanka from where we will rescue Sita after killing Ravana. Without a bridge to tame the ferocity of Varuna the sea-god, even the gods and anti-gods cannot dream of conquering Lanka."

The practical advice of Sugriva pleased Rama.

Addressing Hanuman, he said, "My *tapasya* is strong enough to dry up the ocean. Bridging it is easy enough. But first, O *Vanara*, I must get all the details from you. Tell me about Lanka. Start with the main gates. How are they guarded? How powerful is the rakshasa army?"

Hanuman replied:

*"An exquisite city, Lanka:
Musth elephants everywhere,
Everywhere chariots and rakshasas.
Four massive gates
With huge iron bars.
Catapults and stones
Poised for firing.
Surrounded by a wall
Of gold, studded with
Gems, corals, lapis lazuli.
An enormous moat
Swarming with crocodiles.
Four drawbridges protected*

*By fire-spewing machines.
 Ravana always alert,
 Ravening for war.
 A rock-built city,
 Perched on high rock.
 I damaged the ramparts
 And filled up the moat.
 Cross the ocean, and
 Lanka is vulnerable.
 Give the order, Sire,
 We are ready to march!"*

Rama welcomed the sensible suggestion of Hanuman and replied, "I will raze Lanka to the ground. I promise this. Sugriva, the sun has reached its meridian and is entering the constellation of Abhijit, the sign of victory. Order the troops to advance. Sita's abductor will not escape!"

On orders from Sugriva, a horde of stampeding *vanaras* emerged from caves and wooded mountain slopes.

Dharmatma Rama marched towards the south with a magnificent army of hundreds of thousands of tree-dwellers, some as powerful as elephants.

They bounded and hopped and leapt southwards, grumbling and growling like lions, whirling huge tree trunks and waving flowering boughs, feasting on honey and fruits on the way. They sparred with each other, playfully scuffed each other's heads, somersaulted and piggybacked.

*Dark-gray cloud masses
 Obscuring the horizon
 Along the entire south,
 Mile after mile after mile,
 Camping beside lakes,
 Traversing forested hills,
 Skirting inaccessible jungles,
 Piercing fruit-laden woods,
 Cheerful and playful,
 Childishly aggressive,
 Swift as wind they covered*

*The face of the earth.
 Agile and muscular,
 Some did handsprings,
 Lashed their tails,
 Stamped their feet,
 Clawed at trees,
 Clambered up hills,
 Roaring and screaming,
 Plucked out creepers,
 Crying "Kila! Kila!"
 Lakhs and lakhs of them,
 Energetic vanaras
 Ordered by Sugriva
 To liberate Sita
 From Ravana's clutches.*

Rama, accompanied by Lakshmana and Sugriva, descending to the plains, indicated an enchanting forest beside the shores of the heaving ocean, and said, "We will camp here. Here we will devise a plan of penetrating Lanka."

*Instructed by Rama,
 Lakshmana and Sugriva
 Pitched camp there:
 Horde upon horde
 Of vanara soldiers,
 Like a second ocean
 With honey-yellow waves.
 Awed, they stared at
 The storm-lashed ocean
 At whose far end
 Was the rakshasa city.
 A frothing ocean,
 A dancing and laughing ocean,
 And the moon rose,
 And the shark-and-crocodile
 Infested ocean
 Reflected a multiplicity
 Of milk-white moons,*

*An ocean of mountainous reefs,
 A fathomless ocean,
 An impassable ocean
 A wind-whipped ocean,
 With voluminous waves
 Rising and falling
 On the backs of serpents
 And water monsters,
 A fearful ocean,
 Haven of rakshasas,
 A sky-touching ocean
 Till sea became sky
 And sky became sea,
 A wave-clashing ocean,
 A royal ocean roaring
 With drumbeats of billows,
 A pearl-filled ocean
 Leaping in fury,
 Watched by the vanaras
 Standing on its shore,
 Agog with astonishment,
 Wonder-woven.*

In Lanka, Ravana marvelled at the speed with which Hanuman wrought fiery havoc in his capital. He stared with downcast eyes, troubled, and said to his rakshasas, "Impregnable Lanka has been ravaged by a vandal of a *vanara*. My palaces are in ruins, my finest followers are dead, and the capital despoiled and turned upside down. Advise me now—what should I do? I need practical suggestions—a plan that can be immediately implemented, a plan beneficial to us. According to the wise, the root of victory is good advice, and that is what I need now in order to repulse the threat of Rama.

"There are three kinds of people in the world: the good, the bad, the in-between.

"The good are those who, before acting, consult dependable friends, relatives with common interests, and their superiors—putting their ultimate trust, of course, in Providence. These are the

purushottama, very exceptional people.

"The in-between are those who work out their problems all by themselves, and pursue dharma independently, acting totally on their own discretion and judgment.

"The bad are those who abandon trust in Providence and are unable to discriminate between what is salutary and what is harmful; they disregard their duty and go blindly ahead, saying, 'We'll do it, no matter what.'

"Just as there are superior, inferior, and in-between people, there is good, bad, and in-between advice.

"Good advice is that which is given after an objective study of the problem and with regard to the moral aspects involved.

"In-between advice is that which is given after heated and protracted discussion of the problem, seen from many different points of view.

"Bad advice is that which is given after a makeshift unanimity of agreement is arrived at, but each continues to argue and counter-argue the merits of his opinion, regardless of its relevance to the problem.

"You are all intelligent. I would like you to determine what is the right course for me now.

"Rama is advancing against Lanka with a multitudinous might of *vanaras*. We must prepare to defend Lanka and repulse his hordes."

Ill-informed about the strength of Rama's army and eager to please their master Ravana, the ignorant rakshasas joined their palms in *anjali* and said, "Your majesty, we have a splendid army equipped with iron maces, javelins, double-edged swords, darts, super-sharp spears and lances. Why should you feel apprehensive? Order your son Indrajit to rout the hordes of Rama, maharaja! It is inconceivable that any harm can come to you from an assortment of ordinary men and monkeys. Don't even think about it. Rama is going to perish by your hand."

The rakshasa General Prahasta stood up like a dark cloud and, doing *anjali*, said, "We have routed the gods, the Danavas, the Gandharvas, and the Pishachas. Why should we fear these two mortals? Hanuman tricked us earlier when we were drunk, but now I'll rid the world of every *vanara*! You have only to command me, Sire."

Another rakshasa, Durmukha, rose and declared, "We cannot swallow this insult! I will wipe out every single *vanara*, no matter where he hides—in the ocean, in heaven, or in the nether realm of Rasatala!"

Brandishing a bludgeon stained with flesh and blood, the rakshasa Vajradamshttra, in a paroxysm of anger, shouted, "Who wants to fight this miserable monkey Hanuman when there's bigger game like Rama and Lakshmana waiting to be bludgeoned to death? Give the order, Sire—for only the resourceful achieve success."

Kumbhakarna's son, the extraordinarily powerful Nikumbha, livid with anger, suggested to the rakshas, Stay here with our maharaja and protect him. I will go and singlehanded massacre Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman and the *vanara* hordes."

Another rakshasa, hill-huge Vajrahanu, ran his tongue over his lips and advised, "Have no fear. Do what you normally do. Let me attend to this. Drink date-palm wine and make merry. Let it be my business to get rid of Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Angada and the *vanaras*.

They rose, brandishing their weapons. Vibhishana, Ravana's youngest half-brother, respectfully persuaded them to take their seats.

With palms joined in *anjali* he said to Ravana, "Dear brother, the wise say that when the three means of conciliation, gift-giving, and sowing dissension have failed to achieve one's purpose, the time is ripe for the use of naked force. But force works only against the unprepared, or against those who are already harassed by others, or those whose fate is perverse. Rama is vigilant, he is determined to fight and win, divine power is on his side, he has mastered his anger—how is it possible then to overcome him?

"In what way has Rama harmed the lord of the rakshasas? Why did Ravana have to go to Janasthana and abduct Rama's wife Sita?

"Khara trespassed into Rama's ashram, and Rama in self-defence killed him. What is wrong with a person defending his life as best as he can?

"Sita's abduction is the root of our crisis. Why make matters worse? Return Sita immediately. Return her before Rama's arrows pulverize this beautiful capital and annihilate all of us."

Vibhishana's words were gentle, logical, and well-meant. But

Ravana's mind was inflamed with desire for Sita, and he retorted angrily:

"We have nothing to fear—not from any person, not from anywhere. Sita will not be returned to Rama! Even if he attacks with the help of the gods led by Indra himself, I will rout him in battle."

Ravana, the ten-headed rakshasa, pronounced this and dismissed straight-speaking Vibhishana.

The powerful General Mahaparshva noticed Ravana's mounting anger and, with palms joined in *anjali*, said to the rakshasa lord:

"Sire, only a fool decides not to taste honey after searching for it high and low in a forest infested with snakes and wild beasts. Who is greater than you? If anyone thinks he is, crush his head under your foot and do what you like with Sita. Be the cock to her hen. Rape her repeatedly—who is there to stop you? After you have finished with her, who will dare question what you have done?"

Raja Ravana listened patiently to Mahaparshva's advice and replied:

"I have a secret in my past, Mahaparshva, and I will today confess it. It happened a long time ago.

"It was the *apsara* Punjikasthala. I saw her flash through the sky once on her way to pay homage to Brahma Pitamaha, the grand-sire of the worlds. I stripped her and raped her. She reached the abode of Brahma; she was trembling like a storm-tossed lotus. Self-Born Brahma cursed me in righteous anger: 'Ravana, if ever you rape another woman, your head will burst into a hundred fragments. Never doubt this!'

"That is why I dare not take Sita by force to my luxurious bed. The words of the curse haunt me."

Before leaving, Vibhishana once again addressed his elder half-brother Ravana:

*"Raja, Sita is a serpent—
Her breasts its coils,
Her fears its venom,
Her sweet smiles its fangs,
Her five fingers its five hoods.*

*Why have you brought her here?
Before the hill-huge vanaras,
Sharp-toothed and long-nailed,
Obliterate Lanka,
Restore Sita to Rama!"*

Ravana bitterly reproached reasonable Vibhishana. "Better an enemy, better a poisonous snake, than a traitor posing as a friend. I should have known better than trusting a relative. The whole world knows about relatives—they are the ones who enjoy the misfortunes of their kith and kin. Relatives are always conspiring to topple anyone in the family who has power, enterprise, learning, and dharma. If he happens to be a hero, they spare no pains to humiliate him. They relish scandal, they are devious and deceitful, they are cruel and dangerous.

"I'll repeat to you a couple of shlokas uttered by elephants in the Padma-vana when they saw men advancing towards them with snares in their hands to entrap them:

*" 'Fire and weapons and snares
We do not fear—
The dangerous are really
The near and the dear.
They're the enemy
Who'll take special pains
To ensure that all of us
Are put in chains.'*

"From cows we get milk, in Brahmins we find *tapasya*, in women we see fickleness, in relatives we find peril. It is natural, dear brother, that you do not appreciate the fact that I am honoured by the world and that I crush my enemies with my might. Drops of water slip off lotus leaves; so friendship shown to a scoundrel has no effect. Thunderclouds in autumn fail to saturate the earth with rain; so friendship has no effect on the unworthy. Bees fly away after sucking the honey of a flower; so the unworthy discard a friendship after taking advantage of it. An elephant finds his trunk choked with sand after bathing in a river; so friendship suffocates when shown to an undeserving person.

"If anyone else had spoken to me as you have done, O night-prowler, I would have strangled him to death then and there. You I will spare, but I curse you—you are a shame on your race!"

Vibhishana stood up, mace in hand.

With right-speaking Vibhishana rose four other rakshasas.

He seemed to be speaking from up in space as he explained fearlessly to the lord of the rakshasas, "Raja, you have lost your senses. Say what you like. You are my elder brother. I respect you like a father. But this is not the path of dharma that you are following. I cannot accept your harsh words. It is easy to find flatterers, Ravana; it is difficult to find people who favour you with unpleasing yet beneficial words, and it is even more difficult to find people who will listen to such words. I did all I could to help you, O night-prowling lord. *Svasti te-astu!* May you prosper! I will now take leave of you, since you prefer not to listen to me. Very few heed good advice when the hour of death is upon them."

Leaving Ravana's palace, Vibhishana defected to the camp of Rama and Lakshmana.

Descending from the sky with his four followers, the noble Vibhishana ran, fell at the feet of Rama, and said:

"I am the youngest half-brother of Ravana. He has insulted me grossly. You are the refuge of all creatures; I have come to you for protection. I have abandoned my city Lanka, my friends and my possessions. My kingdom, my life and my future I now place in your hands."

Rama looked at him, with eyes that seemed to be drinking him in, and spoke these cautious words, "Give me the facts about the strength and weakness of the rakshasas."

Vibhishana supplied details about the military power of Ravana, adding:

"Self-Born Brahma has granted ten-headed Ravana a special boon—so he is invulnerable to all creatures including Gandharvas, serpents, and birds. My powerful elder brother Kumbhakarna is the equal of Indra himself. The commander of Ravana's forces is Prashasta, whom you have probably heard of. He routed Manibhadra on Mount Kailasa. Ravana's son Indrajit wears armour that no weapon can pierce, and can make himself invisible on the battlefield after propitiating the oblation-consuming god of fire. Lanka has crores of rakshasas who subsist on flesh and blood and

who can change form at will. And Ravana, who leads them, has defeated even the gods in battle.”

Rama said, “I will kill Ravana, his sons, and Prahasta. I give you my word. And having done so, I will install you king of Lanka. Ravana can run to the underworld or to the abode of Brahma, but he will not escape alive.”

Rama, finest of Raghavas, facing the ocean, intoned threateningly:

*“I will dry you up, Ocean!
I will dry up Patala
The nether-world as well!
When my arrows consume
Your waters and your creatures,
You will be nothing but
An expanse of sand,
And my army will cross
To the other shore on foot.
Abode of the Danavas!
What do you know
Of my valour and prowess?
Reservoir of waters!
You are proud, you will suffer.”*

*Fitting an arrow charged
With the magic of Brahma,
Rama pulled his bow taut.
He pulled it fiercely!
Heaven and earth trembled!
The mountains trembled!
Darkness shrouded the earth!
The quarters were obscured!
Lakes and rivers overflowed!
Sun and moon swerved!
Stars shifted orbits!
The sky was pitch-dark
In spite of sunlight!*

*Hundreds of meteors
Flashed in the firmament!
Thunder reverberated!
Lightning zig-zagged!
Sky-winds blew,
Uprooting trees and
Splintering rocks!
The Ocean throbbed and swelled.
Rama remained firm.*

*Then rose Sagara,
The Ocean himself,
Like the Sun on Meru,
Surrounded by serpents
With flaming hoods,
Shining like gold,
Like lapis lazuli,
Crimson-robed,
Red-flower-garlanded,
Eyes like lotuses,
Vari-flower-crowned,
On his breast the brilliant
Kaustubha gem,
And hanging around it
A single string of pearls;
Cloud-and-wind-encircled,
Sagara rose,
Escorted by the rivers
Ganga and Sindhu.*

*Sagara the sea-god,
With Ganga and Sindhu,
Palms joined in anjali,
Said humbly to Rama
With strung bow in hand:
“Gentle scion of Raghu!
Earth,
Wind,
Akasha-space,*

*Water,
Light,
Are stable and follow
An eternal pattern.
I am of water, watery;
I am fathomless.
I am unfordable:
My nature is thus.
But I will advise you.
Neither greed nor ambition nor fear
Will make me solidify
My waters infested with crocodiles.
For you, however,
I have a way.
My sharks will refrain
From attacking your army,
My waves will become
Steps for the vanaras."*

*Rama said:
"Refuge of Varuna!
Grant my request!
Where should I shoot
My marvellous arrow?"*

*Seeing the weapon,
The ocean replied:
"To the north is Draumakulya,
An area most holy,
Inhabited by robbers,
Fierce-looking and vicious,
Who drink my waters.
Ensure that your arrow
Falls exactly there."
Like a bolt of lightning,
The arrow of Rama
Coursed through the air
And landed in Maru.
With a shriek the earth*

*Split open and waters
Gushed from the underworld.
When the fissure dried up,
The sea-god told Rama:
"Benevolent sir,
Here is Nala, the son
Of Vishvakarma,
The celestial architect.
He will build the bridge
On my waters, and I
Will allow it, for he
Is as good as his father."*

*It was eighty miles wide,
Eight hundred miles long,
Superbly constructed,
Precisely cemented,
As clear and elegant as the parting
In a woman's hair.*

In Lanka, Ravana's spies brought him information that Rama and his armies were encamped near the impregnable mountain Suvela.

"Summon an emergency meeting of the council of ministers," ordered Ravana. "The time demands frank discussion and decision."

The meeting was called.

Ravana, satisfied with the deliberations, dismissed his ministers, and sought the seclusion of a private room in his palace.

Then, taking with him an extraordinarily adept magician named Vidyujjihva, he strode towards the place where Sita was kept captive.

The lord of the rakshasa explained to the long-tongued maya-expert Vidyujjihva, "The two of us will weave a maya of deception around Sita. Produce a maya-head of Rama, together with a bow and an arrow, and return here."

"It will be done, Sire," replied Vidyujjihva.

Ravana saw Sita sitting on the ground of the Ashoka grove, surrounded by rakshasis.

He addressed her with confident impudence.

*“Noble lady,
Your husband is dead.
The killer of Khara,
Your Raghava consort,
Whom you prefer
To the lord of the rakshasas,
Has been exterminated
By a rakshasa general.
Obsessed with killing me,
He and his hordes
Of vanaras encamped
On the shore of the ocean.
On orders from me
My general Prahasta
Swooped at night
On the sleeping soldiers
And butchered them, including
Rama and Lakshmana.
With a swing of his sword,
Prahasta decapitated.
Your sleeping husband.
Look!
This is his head,
Blood-soaked, dust-smeared,
To serve as proof!”*

Turning to a rakshasi, the fearful Ravana said, “Order the brave and cruel rakshasa Vidyujjihva here. He’s the one who returned with Rama’s severed head.”

Vidyujjihva *pranamed* Ravana; in his hands he carried the head and the bow.

Ravana ordered, “Show Sita the head of Dasharatha’s son. Let her learn of her husband’s plight.”

Vidyujjihva placed the handsome head near Sita’s feet and vanished.

Ravana flung the powerful, lustrous bow near Sita and said, “Here is Rama’s bow, famed in the three worlds! It was brought

here by Prashasta after he sliced off the mortal's head the night of the attack."

Looking straight at Sita, Ravana whispered, "Now, will you submit to my will?"

Sita trembled; she collapsed on the ground like a plantain tree wrenched from its roots. Regaining consciousness after some time, she lamented:

*"Hail I am finished!
O strong-armed lord,
So faithful to the vow
Of your dead father,
Without you near me
What am I but a widow?
What greater calamity
Could fall on a wife
Than the death of her husband
Before her own?
I am a despicable woman!
I am responsible
For the death of my lord!
That he should have crossed
The ocean for me
And died without even
So much as a struggle,
Helpless as a cow!
I am the shame of my race!
By marrying me, Rama
Married death. Surely
In my previous life
I must have obstructed
The marriage of a girl
That I should suffer thus
In this life for my husband.
Ravana, take me to him,
Lay me on top of Rama,
Unite husband and wife
And do a supreme good.
Join my head with his head,*

*My body with his body.
Let me be one with
My noble-minded lord!"*

Even as Sita was grieving in this fashion, a rakshasa guard of the palace rushed up to Ravana and, with joined palms, panted:

"May victory always be yours, Sire! Prahasta and your other ministers have come and desire audience with you. The matter is urgent, maharaja."

Ten-headed Ravana strode out of the Ashoka garden.

As soon as he left, the illusory head and bow vanished.

Impelled by affection for Sita, the wife of Vibhishana, a rakshasi named Sarama, approached her and soothed her with sweet words.

Sita lay in stupor on the ground, like a mare soiled after rolling in the dust.

Sarama said to Sita, "I hid myself behind a bush and heard every word of what Ravana said to you and what you replied to him. I love you more, large-eyed lady, than I fear Ravana.

"I can tell you why Ravana was in such a hurry to get out of this grove. He is agitated. He knows he cannot kill self-knowing Rama, nor can he kill the *vanaras* who are protected by Rama as the gods are by Indra.

"He is subtle in thought and action. He tried to deceive you with the magic of maya. Stop grieving, for a great joy lies in store for you. You are the favoured one of Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune. Rama has camped on the southern shore of the ocean, and preparations are afoot to rescue you."

Rama led an advance party of ten *vanara* chiefs: the two sons of Sushena, the general Nila, Bali's son Angada, alert Sharabha, Dvidida, Hanuman, brave Sanuprastha, Rishabha and Rishabha-skandha.

Ravana's son Indrajit checked them with a stupendous volley of arrows that screened him from view as clouds obscure the sun.

Indrajit's snake-arrows, fired from his divinely-inspired bow, pierced the bodies of Rama and Lakshmana, they stood on the field with blood streaming down their frames, like two flames-of-the-forest in full bloom.

Indrajit, firm as a solid mass of collyrium, stretched his bow taut and released an even fiercer shower of arrows.

Rama and Lakshmana were trapped in a bewildering arrow-net; immobilised, they toppled and fell on the ground. The lords of the earth lay asprawl on the earth.

Enmeshed, lacerated and pierced in every finger's-breadth of their bodies, they lay, helpless. Blood gushed from their wounds like water from two hot springs.

Rama was the first to fall, critically wounded.

Seeing Rama topple, Lakshmana despaired and, succumbing to grief, collapsed also.

Stretched on two beds of arrows, drenched in gore, sighing like serpents, twitching feebly, they looked like two golden flags fallen and smeared in the dust.

The *vanara* leaders tearfully surrounded them.

Indrajit rejoiced at the excellence of his feat and announced to his fellow-rakshasas, "The two mighty brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, have fallen victim to my arrows. Not even with the help of the gods, anti-gods, and *rishis* can they free themselves from the magic mesh of my shafts!"

The rakshasas, wonder-struck, applauded Indrajit with cloud-thundering praises.

"Rama is dead!" they screamed.

Seeing both brothers inert on the field, they concluded that both had finally been slain by Indrajit.

Indrajit returned to Lanka in a giddy flush of victory.

Ravana summoned the rakshasis who guarded Sita. Brimming with joy, he said to Trijata, their leader:

"Inform Sita that Rama and Lakshmana have been killed by Indrajit. Escort her in the aerial chariot Pushpaka and show her their corpses on the battlefield. Point out to her dead husband, proud attachment to whom prevents her from submitting to me. Now at last, free of grief and hope of reunion, she will learn to serve me. She has no refuge left any more; I am the only refuge of large-eyed Sita."

Accompanied by Trijata in the aerial chariot, Sita surveyed the array of *vanara* corpses on the battlefield; she saw the bodies of Rama and Lakshmana lying on the ground surrounded by a host of grieving *vanaras*; she heard the rakshasa warriors exulting.

*Rama and Lakshmana,
Two brothers on the field,
Riddled with arrows,
Insensate and supine,
Bows broken, dart-pierced . . .
Heartbroken Sita grieved:
“Reading the lineaments
Of my body, it was predicted:
‘You will bear sons,
You will never be widowed.’
Liars, all of them!
Rama is dead today!
Yet on my soles I see
Lotus marks suggesting
A highborn lady’s consecration
On the imperial throne.
I see not one ill sign
Indicative of widowhood.
What good now are lotus marks?
What use are they
Now that Rama is dead?
My hair is black and glossy,
My eyebrows are curved,
My teeth are even,
My legs smooth and round,
My eyes are conch-shaped,
My breasts, hands, feet, thighs,
Are all symmetrical,
My breasts touch each other
And have depressed nipples,
My navel is set deep
In my shapely stomach,
Well-fleshed are my breasts
And ample thighs,
My skin-hair is soft,
My complexion pearl-bright,
I have my ten toes
And two soles touching
The ground when I walk—*

*Twelve auspicious signs.
And my smile is gentle.
Yet Rama is dead,
A victim of Kala!"*

Trijata said to sorrowing Sita, "Lady, devi, do not despair. Your husband is alive. I have good reasons to believe that Rama and Lakshmana are not dead. The faces of soldiers who have lost their leader do not show either anger or joy. You could not, if a widow, have mounted the aerial chariot Pushpaka, since it is a celestial vehicle. Leaderless soldiers panic, like a ship adrift. But the *vanara* hosts show no confusion or disorder. I feel for you, ascetic lady, and that is why I am telling you all this. I have never so far spoken an untruth, and I have no intention of telling a lie now or later. Dead men's faces distort gruesomely—yet look, how handsome and composed are the faces of Rama and Lakshmana. No, it is certain they are not dead."

Sita, who was like a daughter of the gods, listened to Trijata's words and, joining her palms in *anjali*, said, "I deeply hope so."

Drawing on his unique store of resilience and endurance, Rama regained consciousness. Seeing his brother supine, bleeding and senseless, Rama said to himself: *What use is Sita to me, what use is life itself, now that Lakshmana my brother is dead? I can always find another wife like Sita in this world if I search for one, but never a brave and faithful brother like Lakshmana.*

Sugriva said to his father-in-law Sushena, "Arrange to remove Rama and Lakshmana to the safety of Kishkindha till they have completely recovered from their wounds. It shall be my duty now to kill Ravana and his relatives and bring back Sita from her captivity in Lanka."

Sushena replied to the lord of the *vanaras*:

"A long time ago a fierce battle was waged between the gods and the anti-gods. The anti-gods resorted to magical tricks and succeeded in routing the gods. It was Brihaspati who revived the gods with special remedies applied along with the chanting of mantras.

"Order the *vanaras* Sampati and Panasa to hurry to the ocean of

sweet milk and procure the medicines. Surely they know of the magical mountain herb *samjivakarani* which revives the fatally stricken, and *vishalya* which heals all weapon-inflicted wounds. Out of the ocean of sweet milk, which was churned by the gods and anti-gods, was produced *amrita*, the nectar of immortality; from the centre of this ocean rose two mountains, Chandra and Drona, where the miracle herbs are found. Order Hanuman, son of the wind-god, to go there himself."

Even as he was saying this, a tempestuous wind began to blow; lightning flashed ominously; the storm-lashed waves rose and fell; and the mountains seemed to sway. Huge boughs snapped from Lanka's mountain trees and splashed in the raging waters. The sea-monsters, terrified, plunged deeper in the fathomless ocean.

It was Garuda, the king of birds, vehicle of Vishnu, brave son of Vinata, streaking in the midst of the *vanara* army like an incandescent torch.

"I am your friend Garuda," he said, "I have come to help you."

Lovely-winged Garuda stroked the brothers Rama and Lakshmana with his wings, and with his hands gently caressed and wiped their moon-bright faces.

Instantly, their wounds closed and healed, and lustre returned to their faces and bodies. Their splendour, majesty, prowess, courage, intelligence and memory increased two-fold.

Respectfully circumambulating Rama by doing *pradakshina*, Garuda embraced Dasharatha's son and soared into the sky with the speed of wind.

The *vanara* leaders, witnessing the recovery of Rama and Lakshmana, beat their tails, growled like lions, and thumped kettledrums. The noise was as totally tumultuous as the reverberation of thunderclouds at midnight at the end of summer.

On orders from Ravana, a valiant rakshasa named Dhumraksha led a huge force against the army of Rama. The rakshasas were armed with spears, bludgeons, maces, lances, sticks, hooks, picks, nooses, and axes.

Dhumraksha wrought havoc with the accuracy of his arrows which rained like venomous missiles.

Hanuman picked up a massive rock and hurled it at Dhum-

raksha. It arced towards his chariot; Dhumraksha nimbly leapt out in time; the rock dashed against the chariot, splintering wheels, pole, shafts, and Dhumraksha's bow.

Hanuman rushed at Dhumraksha with another huge mountain rock in his hands. Dhumraksha smashed his nail-studded mace on Hanuman's skull. Undismayed and unhurt, Hanuman struck the rakshasa with his rock-weapon. His limbs crushed to bloody pulp, Dhumraksha thudded on the earth like a hill disintegrating.

News of the death of Dhumraksha sent Ravana into a paroxysm of anger. The intake of his breath was like the hiss of a snake.

Turning to the mercilessly malignant rakshasa Vajradamshttra, he shouted:

"Brave hero! Proceed immediately with a contingent of ferocious rakshasas and wipe out Dasharatha's son Rama, Sugriva and the *vanaras*."

Skilled-in-maya Vajradamshttra assembled a powerful striking force of elephants, horses, camels and mules, and headed the rakshasas armed with swords, maces, discuses, spears, axes and bows.

The glittering horde streamed out of the northern gate where the *vanara* general Angada had pitched his camp.

In the gruesome battle, Angada spread panic in the rakshasa ranks, scattering them as storm-winds devastate clouds.

Enraged, Vajradamshttra loosed a hail of arrows on the *vanara* army. *Vanaras* and rakshasas fell in thousands, their corpses littering the field in arrow-riddled and blood-spattered heaps, meat for crows, vultures and jackals.

With a piercing yell, Angada whirled a rock above his head and flung it at Vajradamshttra's head. It connected; Vajradamshttra reeled; he vomited blood; clutching his mace, he stumbled, giddy. Then he hurled the mace at Angada's chest and grappled in hand-to-hand combat.

They roared, they wrestled, they panted. Blood trickled down their bodies, making them radiantly crimson like two blossoming flames-of-the-forest.

In a flash, elephant-strong Angada rose, his eyes gleaming like a snake's that has been struck with a stick, drew his sharp, gleam-

ing sword and, with one swift stroke, lopped off Vajradamshttra's blood-red head.

Eyes rolling, the head hit the ground and burst into blood-spattered halves.

Ravana's general Akampana was standing nearby with palms joined in *anjali* when news reached the rakshasa king that Vajradamshttra had been killed by the son of Bali.

Ravana said to Akampana, "Go, Akampana, you are versed in the use of every known weapon, you are loyal to me and you thirst for war. Here is your chance. Take the pick of my rakshasa warriors and exterminate the two brothers and Sugriva. Wipe out the entire *vanara* horde of aggressors."

Akampana lifted his magnificent bow and ordered his charioteer, "Drive with all speed to the centre of the field where all the impudent long-tailed *vanaras* are massed. I will annihilate the aggressors who dare to attack the land of the rakshasas."

He fired a volley of arrows at Hanuman, who remained unperturbed and unscratched.

Laughing loudly, Hanuman spun a huge rock and hurled it at Akampana as Indra once hurled his thunderbolt at Namuchi.

Akampana saw the rock spinning towards him, and shattered it in mid-air with two crescent arrows. The rakshasas fled. Akampana stood firm, and fired fourteen needle-sharp flesh-lacerating arrows at immovable Hanuman.

Pierced by the feathered arrows, Hanuman resembled a hill covered with forests, like a flowering Ashoka tree, like a brilliant smokeless flame.

Unhurriedly he uprooted a tree. Then, in one incredible leap, he jumped in front of Akampana. He lifted the tree-trunk high and brought it crashing down on Akampana's head.

The blow knocked Akampana dead.

When he heard of Akampana's death, Ravana was briefly bewildered. He summoned his ministers and discussed future plans. He inspected the defences of Lanka in the afternoon.

Upset by the state of siege, he said to trustworthy Prahasta, one

of the ablest of his generals:

“The city is hard pressed. None can save it now except I, Kumbhakarna, you, Indrajit, and Nikumbha. I give you this charge then—strike out with a body of expert rakshasa warriors and surprise the *vanaras* into chaos and defeat.”

Prahasta drove out of Lanka in a dazzling chariot.

Birds of prey hovered over his vehicle, flying from left to right.

Jackals vomited fire, she-jackals waited.

A meteor sped across the sky and collapsed on the earth.

A cold wind blew.

A cackling vulture perched atop his flagstaff, facing the south.

The charioteer's whip repeatedly slipped out of his hands.

The horses stumbled even on level ground.

Prahasta's brilliance dimmed.

He advanced nevertheless, like a moth into a flame, foolishly imagining that he could rout the army of Sugriva.

He saw the *vanara* chief Nila rushing to combat him. He struck hard with his mace; blood flowed from Nila's head.

Nila hurled a giant rock at Prahasta. It smashed Prahasta's skull and itself disintegrated also.

Prahasta fell like an uprooted tree, blood running down his body like a waterfall down a hill.

The dispirited rakshasas abandoned their dead general and returned to their capital.

Unnerved by the death of Prahasta, humiliated by the series of fatalities, Ravana ordered his rakshasas:

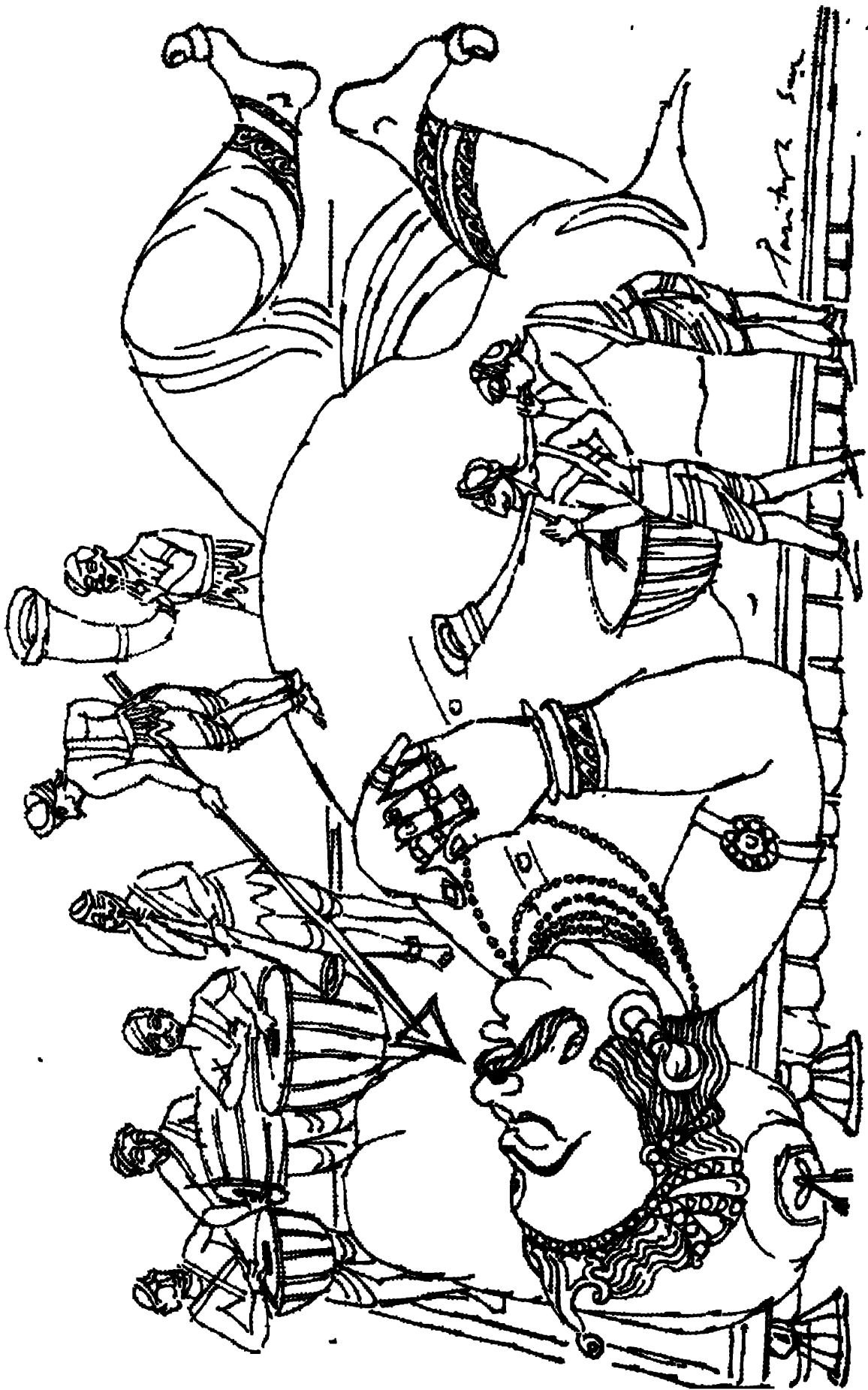
“Guard the gates, garrison the walls. Rouse Kumbhakarna from his stupor. He fell asleep nine days ago, and is deep in debauched exhaustion and sleep. He will snore now for six, seven or even eight months. Wake him! He is the pillar of the rakshasas—he will in no time crush the *vanaras* and the raja's two sons.”

The rakshasas rushed to Kumbhakarna's residence, wondering how they would ever succeed in waking him.

*Kumbhakarna slept,
Breathing like a serpent,
Horrendously snoring,*

*Cavernous-mouthed
Like the yawning underworld,
Flaring nostrils,
Reeking of blood and marrow,
Tempestuous out-breaths
Thrusting back visitors,
Sun-bright diadem,
Golden armlets,
Superbly asprawl . . .
They placed venison
High as Mount Meru
In front of him,
Buffalo meat and bear meat,
Hillocks of pork,
Viands and victuals;
Buckets of blood
And masses of marrow.
They rubbed him with sandal-paste,
Sprinkled sweet perfumes,
Smothered him with incense . . .
Then, with thundering voices,
With puffed-up cheeks
Blowing moon-white conches,
They started the uproar,
A deafening clamour,
A hand-clapping furore,
A chaos, a confusion,
A cachination,
A tumult, a roaring,
A drumming, a blasting,
A shrieking, a screeching,
A stamping, a thumping,
A bursting, a banging,
A clanging, a wailing,
A slapping, a shouting,
A clattering cacophony
Of drums and conches and gongs . . .*

Kumbhakarna slept.



*The rakshasas resorted
To a thumping, a bumping,
A scuffing, a cuffing,
A bashing, a crashing
Of sleeping Kumbhakarna
With pestles and clubs,
With maces and tubs,
With hammers and rocks
And bludgeons and blocks,
And blows from the fists
And fierce ear-twists . . .*

Kumbhakarna slept.

*They gathered in throngs
With the drums and the gongs,
And trumpets and shells
And ding-donging bells,
Trying to surprise
Him with blows and with cries . . .*

Kumbhakarna slept.

*They tore his hair,
They bit his ears.
They tugged and pulled
Till they were in tears.
They scratched his head,
They pummelled his belly,
They peered in his mouth—
Very smelly!*

*Kumbhakarna woke.
“I’m hungry,” he said.
He yawned, he woke.
He had to be fed.
His arms were two pythons,
He gave out a yawn
And a sigh like a storm.*

*His bulging eyes shone
Like torches, like stars
In pitch gloom.
He rose, like Kala
On the day of doom.*

*He gobbled the fat,
He guzzled the wine,
He wolfed the meats
And said they were fine.
He drank the blood,
He chomped the mutton,
Confirming his fame
As the greatest glutton . . .*

Still bleary with sleep, he looked around him at the awe-struck rakshasas and, puzzled, asked:

“Why have you woken me so suddenly? Is the king well? Is he in danger? Tell me. There must be danger, else you would not come here to disturb me. No one wakes me without sufficient cause! Are the gods attacking Lanka?”

Yupaksha, Ravana’s first minister, with palms joined in *anjali* replied:

“No, not the gods, but a mere mortal. Not the Daityas and the Danavas—but *vanaras*, long-tailed, hill-huge beasts. Angry over Sita’s abduction, they have decided to lay siege to Lanka.”

Kumbhakarna rolled his eyes and intoned sombrely, “Do not fear. Today I will glut the rakshasas of Lanka on the blood and meat of *vanaras*, and I will myself gulp the blood of Rama and Lakshmana.”

He downed two thousand pitchers of wine. Flushed and tipsy, he lumbered out of his couch, unsteadily marching, like Kala at the end of a Yuga. The earth shuddered under him. His massive body occupied the entire breadth of the royal highway.

The *vanara* army saw him approach, high as a mountain, a monstrous and fearsome creature; some were paralysed and fell flat on the ground, others fled helter-skelter.

Rama, astonished at the size of the rakshasa who seemed to straddle the earth in three strides as Narayana had done in the past,

asked Vibhishana:

*“Who is this monster
Diademed and pink-eyed,
Like a shooting meteor,
Like a colossal cloud?
Rakshasa or anti-god?
I have never before
Seen such a creature.”*

“He is Kumbhakarna,” replied Vibhishana, “hugely powerful as a result of the boons he has received. When still an infant, he would devour thousands of creatures. The creatures of the world then ran to Indra for help, but Kumbhakarna ripped out a tusk of Indra’s elephant Airavata and gored him with it. The gods, Brahmarishis, and Danavas informed Brahma, lord of all beings, and complained, ‘If he devours creatures at this rate, the world will be depopulated and desolated.’

“Brahma, Grandfather of the worlds, summoned the rakshasa Kumbhakarna. Seeing him, even Brahma was alarmed. Recovering his composure, he said, ‘You must be the child of one of my mind-born sons, procreated by him for the doom of the world. From today you will sleep like one who is dead.’

“Kumbhakarna, thus cursed, fell at Ravana’s feet.

“Ravana, agitated, questioned Brahma, ‘You have felled a tree about to bear fruit. This is not right, O Brahma. It is unjust to curse your own grandson. I know your words cannot be nullified—so sleep he must—but grant him at least a time for sleeping and a time for waking.’

“Brahma replied, ‘He will sleep for six months and wake for a day. He will have only that one day to feed his insatiable appetite by roaming the world over with his mouth wide open; otherwise he might consume the three worlds like a raging conflagration.’ ”

A hundred bows broad and six hundred bows tall, Kumbhakarna advanced like a mountain on the move; his eyes rolled like chariot wheels.

He laughed derisively.

The *vanara* ranks scattered when they saw the gigantic rakshasa striding towards them with a mace like the Supreme Lord of Time,

Kala himself, at the end of a yuga, with his punishing rod in hand like a servant in obeisant attendance.

Hanuman rained rocks, crags and trees at Kumbhakarna's head, but the rakshasa stood firm as a hill.

Swiftly, Kumbhakarna scooped up Sugriva, chief of the *vanaras*, as easily as a strong wind hauling away a cloud.

Hanuman thought: *With Sugriva taken prisoner, all will be lost. I must do something—and fast! Let me take the shape of a mountain.*

In the meantime, Sugriva clawed viciously at Kumbhakarna, tearing off both his ears, biting off his nose, and ripping his thighs with the nails on his feet.

Kumbhakarna, shrieking in agony, dashed Sugriva on the ground.

Sugriva bounded up like a ball and fled to the safety of Rama's camp.

Noseless and earless, Kumbhakarna emitted a blood-curdling yell. He coughed blood. He glowed like a mountain drenched in gore.

Rama advanced and challenged him, "Come, royal rakshasa, I face you now with my bow. Come and die at my hands."

Rama himself! thought Kumbhakarna.

Laughing weirdly, he lunged forward, saying, "I am not Viradha. I am not Kabandha. I am not Khara, Bali, Maricha. Know me! I am Kumbhakarna! Noseless and earless, but I am Kumbhakarna. I am not mouthless, and I will devour you today, O Rama!"

Rama fired a feathered arrow. It penetrated Kumbhakarna like a bolt of lightning.

Rama shot arrows that had earlier sliced through seven *sal* trees and killed Bali. Kumbhakarna opened his enormous mouth and swallowed them like drops of water.

Rama fitted the wind-swift *vayavya* arrow. It severed Kumbhakarna's mace-wielding arm. Kumbhakarna screamed, and lumbered towards Rama.

With a golden arrow Rama lopped off the second arm.

Kumbhakarna kept advancing.

Two razor-sharp crescent-shaped arrows sliced off Kumbhakarna's feet.

Kumbhakarna opened his jaws and, roaring, stumbled towards Rama like Rahu bent on devouring the moon.

Rama shot steel arrows inside the gaping mouth, choking Kumbhakarna.

Then he selected the Indra-arrow, a miraculous missile. It flamed across like the dazzling fires of the day of final doom.

It sundered Kumbhakarna's head.

The huge head of the rakshasa floated across the sky like the moon, pale and wan after the passing of the night.

It dropped on the highway of Lanka, demolishing houses, gates and gardens. It rolled across and tumbled in the sea, flattening fish, crushing crocodiles, and pulping water-snakes.

Ravana informed his council of rakshasa ministers, "They are all dead: irrepressible Dhumraksha, Akampana, Prahasta, Kumbhakarna. All foe-crushing, invincible rakshasas, fully versed in the use of every weapon—killed by the incalculably immense prowess of Rama.

*"Rama is remarkable!
He is Narayana himself!
Who can withstand him?
Guard well the gates!
Secure all the entrances!
From dawn to midnight
Keep an eye on the vanaras!
Keep constant vigilance!"*

Ravana's son Indrajit attacked next. With spears, darts and mantra-propelled arrows he harassed Hanuman, Sugriva, Angada, Gandhamadana, Jambavan, Sushena, Dvivida, Nila, Jyotimukha and other *vanara* leaders.

"Lakshmana," said Rama, "the *vanara* forces are in disarray. Indrajit has overwhelmed them with his mantra-missiles. He is now using the Brahma-missile. I know it. He has made himself invisible. How does one fight an invisible enemy?

"All his strength comes from the power given him by Self-Born Brahma. Let us serenely absorb the impact of the celestial missile. The *vanaras* have fled, and when Indrajit sees both of us supine and

‘senseless on the battlefield, he will return to Lanka and report his triumph to Ravana.’”

Seeing Rama and Lakshmana lying unconscious on the field, Sugriva, Nila, Jambavan and Angada did not know what to do.

Wise Vibhishana instilled fresh confidence in them, saying, “They are unconscious, I know. But do not fear, and do not despair. It is all a part of their strategy to neutralise the boon given by Self-Born Brahma to Indrajit.”

Jambavan said to Hanuman, “You are the only one, Hanuman, who can save the *vanaras* now. Display your prowess now! Re-inspire the ranks of *rikshas* and *vanaras*, the cave-dwellers and tree-men, by reviving Rama and Lakshmana. Hurry to the golden peak Rishabha in the Himalayas and procure the medicinal herbs. Four radiant plants grow on its summit: *mrITASamjivani*, *vishalya-karani*, *suvarnakarani*, and *sandhani*. The first revives the dead to life, the second extracts weapons and heals all missile-inflicted wounds, the third restores the original skin colour and texture, and the last re-sets fractured bones.”

Hanuman raised his arms and flew like a smooth-coursing *chakra* hurled by the hand of Vishnu, while under him the ocean waves heaved.

Suddenly he was there, in the white land of Himavant, with caves and waterfalls and creamy clouds. He gazed spellbound on the enchanting golden peaks, including the precipitous Mount Kailasa, the dazzling abode of Brahma and other deities. Phosphorescent herbs illuminated the slopes of these celestial hills.

Hanuman started a frantic search for the herbs, but the plants, sensing the presence of a stranger, withdrew into invisibility. Baffled, mahatma Hanuman screamed; his eyes flamed like live coals; he angrily addressed the mountain:

“Who are you to have no feeling for the plight of Rama? O king of mountains, I will crush you in my embrace! It is intolerable that you should defy me!”

He seized the summit of the mountain, with its treasure of trees, elephants, gold and other minerals, and violently broke it off.

He rose into the sky holding aloft the snapped peak.

The gods and the anti-gods witnessed the feat and applauded.

Soaring with the mind-swift speed of Garuda, Hanuman followed the course of the sun on his return journey. He shone in the



sky; the mineral-glinting peak glowed in his hand. He streaked through the sky like Vishnu himself displaying his fiery thousand-rayed *chakra*.

No sooner did Rama and Lakshmana inhale the aroma of the miracle herbs than they revived; their wounds healed; and they stood up, dazzling with valour.

The *vanaras* recovered too, resurrecting like sleepers waking after a long night of slumber.

Hanuman, son of the fragrance-wafting wind, returned the summit with its medicinal herbs to the mountain and swiftly re-joined Rama.

Vibhishana confronted Indrajit on the battlefield. Brave Indrajit insultingly addressed Vibhishana:

*“You! Brother of my father!
Born of the rakshasa race!
O my own uncle Vibhishana,
Why do you harm me—
I who am Ravana’s son?
Have you no brotherly feeling?
Have you no pride of birth?
O despoiler of dharma,
Have you no sense of dharma?
Wicked fool, can’t you see
That the wise despise you
For betraying your own
And joining the enemy?
How foolish can you be—
Is there no difference
Between living with one’s own
And licking the feet of strangers?
One’s worst relative
Is better than any stranger.
A stranger is always a stranger!
O younger brother of Ravana,
Only one like you
Could have been so treacherous,*

So impossibly selfish!"

Taunted by the words of his brother's son Indrajit, Vibhishana replied:

*"Rakshasa, you knew me well.
 Why reproach me now?
 I am your elder.
 Have you no manners?
 I was born a rakshasa,
 But my nature is human,
 I am naturally good.
 I hate cruelty,
 I loathe adharma.
 Ask Ravana what made
 Brother banish brother,
 No matter how dissimilar?
 It is right to renounce
 A man of adharma
 As one would a snake
 Clinging to one's body.
 It is right to avoid
 A stealer of goods
 Or one who has intercourse
 With another's wife,
 Even as one avoids
 A house in flames.
 To distrust friends,
 To sleep with another's wife,
 To steal property—
 These three faults always
 Lead to destruction.
 Your father is doomed.
 Lanka is doomed.
 You are doomed.
 You are an impulsive boy,
 Bursting with pride,
 Foolish and ill-mannered.
 Say what you will, rakshasa,*

*Death's noose has caught you.
Here is Lakshmana—
Fight him, display
Your prowess, shoot
Your weapons— but beware!
Come near his arrows,
And you will die."*

Lakshmana and Indrajit faced each other, eager for combat, like two rutting elephants poised for deadly duel.

Lakshmana fired four steel-tipped arrows that killed the gold-caparisoned horses of Indrajit's chariot. As the chariot wobbled and swerved, a crescent-shaped lovely-feathered arrow from Lakshmana's bow whizzed across like Indra's thunderbolt and decapitated Indrajit's charioteer.

Indrajit lost heart. The *vanara* leaders shouted in joy.

But, recovering his composure, he attacked, fiercely, stretching his bow fully taut, scattering havoc in the ranks of the *vanaras*, who retreated behind Lakshmana for safety.

Swiftly, surely, coolly, Lakshmana shot an arrow that sliced Indrajit's bow in two.

As Indrajit picked up another and struggled to string it, Lakshmana fired three arrows that disintegrated the weapon. Five more snake-arrows lacerated Indrajit's chest and fell on the earth, slithering like five crimson serpents.

But Indrajit, undismayed, charged his Yama-arrow with a mantra, and Lakshmana countered by selecting an irresistible Kubera-missile.

As each fired his arrow, his face glowed with an eerie supernatural radiance. Their arrows lit up the sky with uncanny brilliance, and collided in mid-air with an earth-shattering explosion resembling the head-on clash of two planets. Sparks crackled and smoke billowed.

Fitting an invincible Indra-arrow and pulling his bow-string fully taut, Lakshmana prayed to the deity of the weapon:

*"If Rama, Dasharatha's son,
Is truly a dharmatma,
If Rama is firm in truth,*

*If Rama is loyal, and
Absolutely unrivalled,
Then kill Ravana's son!"*

Stretching his bow up to his ear, Lakshmana released the Indra-missile propelled by the appropriate mantra. It sped straight towards its target.

It severed the handsome head of Indrajit. With casque and dazzling ear-rings, the head rolled on the ground; dripping blood, it shone like gold.

*Dead on the battlefield
Lay Ravana's son Indrajit;
Like the bright sun setting
Behind the Asta hills,
Like flame without heat
Lay Ravana's son Indrajit—
And the world, freed
Of pain and persecution,
Rejoiced.*

Hearing of the grisly and cruel end of his son Indrajit on the battlefield, Ravana fainted.

Regaining consciousness after a long time, the anguished rakshasa lord rolled his bloodshot eyes and promised the night-prowlers standing in front of him:

"My son tried to trick the *vanaras* by using maya and producing a corpse on the battlefield and saying, 'This is Sita.' That illusion will become reality today. I will do what it gives me great delight to do—I will kill Sita who continues to be devoted to her wicked Kshatriya husband!"

He picked up a sharp sword as bright as the stainless sky and, flourishing it wildly, rushed out of the palace.

Behind him came his wife Mandodari and his chief counsellors.

They and others tried to hold him back, but his raging anger drove him tempestuously to the Ashoka grove where Sita was kept captive.

Seeing him armed and charging towards her, Sita lamented:

*"What is my fault?
O what have I done
To die defenceless?
I was loyal to my husband.
When Ravana entreated me
Saying, 'Be my wife',
I always refused him.
What could have happened?
Why must he kill me?
Are they both dead—
Rama and Lakshmana?"*

A noble and virtuous counsellor, Suparshva, moved by Sita's misery, advised Ravana:

"Why are you bent, O ten-headed lord of the rakshasas, on killing Sita and transgressing dharma? You have studied the Vedas, you have observed the strictest vows—how can you even think of harming a woman? Leave lovely Sita, and direct the fury of your anger and prowess against Rama. Today is the fourteenth day of the dark lunar fortnight; tomorrow, as the new moon emerges, sword in hand march against Rama and celebrate victory. Then, brave and honoured, return and possess Sita."

Ravana found the suggestion of his wise counsellor agreeable and returned to the assembly hall of the palace.

Ravana in a burst of anger said to his charioteer:

*"Rama is a tree.
Sita is its flower,
Their happiness its fruit.
Its boughs are Sugriva,
Hanuman and others.
I'll chop it down."*

The great chariot-hero Ravana swiftly drove to do battle with Rama. The earth shuddered; the rivers, hills, and forests trembled; and lions, deer, and birds, terrified, scattered aghast.

Ravana, whose wrath made the world weep, fired a volley of

steel arrows; Rama received them on his forehead like the petals of a blue lotus.

Rama countered with a celestial missile that spat out arrows that hissed and pierced like five-headed snakes.

The gods, gandharvas and horse-headed Kinnaras shouted: "It's an unfair duel! Rama is on foot, and Ravana rides a chariot!"

But the combat continued, and Rama and Ravana rained such blinding successions of arrow at each other that their bodies were obscured into near-invisibility by the thick screen of shafts and missiles that darkened the battlefield.

Rama taunted Ravana:
"Call yourself a hero,
Abductor of Sita?
Defenceless and alone,
What chance had she
Against brute force?
Hero you think yourself—
Molester of women,
Thief and coward?
You will die today, Ravana!
Your head will be meat
For vultures, your blood
The drink of jackals.
As eagles devour snakes
So hyenas will crunch
Your bones and intestines!"

"Drive! Drive fast, charioteer!" shouted Ravana, encouraging him with words of military prowess and praise. "Once Ravana makes up his mind, he does not turn back. He does not retreat till he has wiped out all his enemies."

The glorious sage Agastya, seeing Rama harassed by the onslaught of Ravana, arrived there with the gods and, approaching Rama, said:

"Rama, Rama,

*Long-armed Rama,
 Listen to the secret,
 The eternal path,
 Sacred and stable,
 Supremely auspicious,
 The blessing of blessings,
 The eraser of sins,
 The grief-annihilating
 Prolonger of life,
 The hymn to the Sun,
 The 'Aditya-Hridaya'.*

*'O Sun-god,
 I offer you puja!
 You are the god of gods,
 Radiantly refulgent,
 Adored by the gods
 And the anti-gods too!
 Brahma and Vishnu and Shiva
 are you!
 Skanda and Indra and Kubera
 are you!
 Kala and Yama and Soma
 are you!
 Vayu and Varuna and Prajapati
 are you!
 Source of the seasons
 are you,
 Storehouse of light!
 Golden and lustrous
 Maker of the day
 are you,
 Swan of the sky,
 Nourisher of all!
 Destroyer of darkness,
 Seed-bed of happiness
 are you,
 Dispeller of suffering!
 Seven-horse-charioted,*

*Creator and preserver and destroyer
Of the world*

are you,

Life-giver of the Cosmic Egg.

You are the Golden Womb,

Hiranya-garbha,

Bliss personified,

Destroyer of cold,

Master of the Vedas,

Sender of showers,

Weaver of water

are you!

Death

are you!

All-formed,

All-knowing,

Most splendidly splendid!

Controller of planets and stars

are you!

I bow to you!

Namo-astu te!

I bow to you,

O lord of victory,

Lord of the eastern hills,

Lord of the western hills,

Waker of the lotus,

Heart of the mystic Om!

Thousand-rayed deity,

Immeasurable One,

Resplendent One,

Witness of the worlds,

Golden-limbed

Maker of the cosmos,

I praise you,

Namo-astu te!"

"Anyone who chants this song of the Sun overcomes all perils, Rama," continued Agastya. "Offer puja to the god of gods with complete concentration of mind. Repeat the worship and chant

the song three times—and victory will be yours. You will rout Ravana!”

Rama sipped water thrice, meditated on the Sun, and repeated the chant thrice.

He picked up his bow and, refreshed, advanced to combat Ravana.

The sun god gazed happily at Rama and seemed to say, “Hurry, Rama!”

A fierce duel followed between Rama and Ravana. Both now fought from chariots, skilfully weaving them in and out in a variety of bewildering manoeuvres, each obsessed with killing the other.

The Gandharvas and *apsaras* witnessed the horripilating combat, together with hosts of gods and celestial sages, and they marvelled.

They said, “The sea is the sea, and the sky is the sky; the sea can be compared only to the sea, and the sky can be compared only to the sky. The battle between Rama and Ravana can be compared only to a battle between Rama and Ravana.”

Fitting a snake-arrow to his bow, Rama sliced off the resplendent head of Ravana. Dazzling with ear-rings, it bobbed on the ground in the presence of the witnesses from the three worlds.

Instantly another identical head sprang up on Ravana’s shoulders. Again Rama fired, and the second head fell.

A third head rose. It fell too, severed by Rama’s thunderbolt arrow.

A hundred heads appeared one after the other.

Rama, wielder of all weapons, versed in every military skill, expert in the art of celestial missile-shooting, thought: *With these weapons I killed Maricha, Khara, Viradha in the Krauncha forest; with these I pulverised the seven sal trees in the Dandaka forest; with these I humbled the mountains, petrified Bali, and agitated the ocean. Yet they are helpless against Ravana!*

They struggled for seven days while the gods, anti-gods, Gandharvas, Yakshas, and rakshasas watched, fascinated.

They did not rest even for an hour, battling night and day with undiminished fury and valour.

It was then that Rama’s charioteer Matali said, “Are you not aware, my lord, of your exceptional powers? His hour of doom has

come. Use the divine Brahma-missile and destroy him!"

*Rama selected the arrow
Granted by Brahma:
An incredible missile,
Omnipotent, infallible,
Wind in its feathers,
Fire in its head,
Akasha in its shaft,
The mountains of Meru
And Mandara its weight,
Essence-elemental,
Solar-resplendent,
Fiery like Kala's
World-dissolution,
Steel-pulveriser,
Mountain-mangler,
Smeared with the blood
And marrow of victims,
Hissing like a serpent
Spewing its venom,
Feeder of vultures
And jackals and wolves,
Delight of the vanaras
And terror of rakshasas
Picturesquely flaming
Like the plumes of Garuda.*

*Pronouncing the mantra,
Rama fitted the arrow.
The earth shuddered.
Creatures cowered.
Pulling the bow-string
Taut to his ear,
Rama fired the arrow.
It sped like death.
It was a thunderbolt
Hurled by Indra
At Ravana's chest.*

*Slicing his chest,
It fell on the earth
Bloodied, then swerved
And returned like a servant
To the quiver of Rama.*

*“Sadhu! Sadhu!
Excellent! Excellent!”
Said the mahatma gods.
A shower of flowers
Streamed from the sky,
A soft wind blew,
The sun shone serene.
Overcome with grief,
Vibhishana lamented.
Rama consoled him, saying,
“Death ends enmity.
Our end is achieved.
Now perform the death rites,
His last samskaras.
I feel his death too
As much as you do.”*

News of Ravana's death spread in the inner apartments of his palace. Hair awry, rolling in the dust, his wives mourned his passing away; grief-stricken, like cows that have lost their calves, they wept for their lord, the great and illustrious Ravana; they rushed out of the palace crying, “Hai my husband! Hai my lord!” like a herd of she-elephants whose male leader has been slaughtered.

They saw Ravana spread on the battlefield like a black mass of antimony. They fell on his body like uprooted wild creepers, one rubbing his chest, one hanging on his neck, one clutching his feet, another throwing up her arms, another swooning. They wailed:

*“You never listened to us,
You rejected our advice,
You abducted Sita
In spite of our protests.*

*You spurned Vibhishana,
 Your younger brother,
 When he gave counsel.
 By ravishing Sita,
 You have ruined yourself,
 Us, and the rakshasas.
 It is not your fault.
 Destiny determines action,
 Destiny chooses its victims.
 Neither wealth nor valour,
 Neither wish nor work
 Can alter destiny."*

While his other wives lamented loudly, his favourite wife Mandodari looked at him with longing and loving compassion, and said:

*"No, you are not dead.
 You must be sleeping.
 O my cloud-dark husband,
 Dressed in golden-yellow,
 Dazzling with armlets,
 Is it blood on your body?
 Why don't you answer?
 Rise, my lord!
 Who dares insult you?
 Why do you lie unmoving,
 Clasp the earth like a lover?
 Am I not your wife?
 Why don't you speak to me?"*

Rama said quickly to Vibhishana, "It is time to perform the last rituals of Ravana. It is time to comfort and console the women."

In conformity with dharma and reason, Vibhishana replied, "I refuse to perform the last rites of a man who abducted others' wives, who was merciless, tyrannous, and given to adharma. He was my brother, but he was more enemy than brother. As my elder, he can command my puja, but he does not deserve it. The world

will brand me heartless now, but they will praise me after they discover the truth about Ravana."

Rama, devoted-to-dharma and skilful-in-speech, replied, "He was a man of adharma, there is no doubt of that; but he was brave, strong, and consistent. He was a mahatma, he was generous even though he was a tyrant. Death ends enmity. Our end is achieved. Let the last rites be performed; we cannot neglect the *samskaras*. I feel his death as much as you do."

Ravana's body was placed in an open space on a funeral pyre of sandalwood, *padmaka* wood, fragrant *ushira* roots and *bhadrakali* grass, and covered with skins of black antelopes.

Curd and ghee were poured on his shoulders, and a wooden mortar inserted between his thighs.

Vibhishana's friends draped the corpse with cloths of all kinds and sprinkled roasted grain on it. Vibhishana lit the funeral pyre as ordained in the tradition. He consoled the wives of Ravana and persuaded them to return to Lanka.

Rama laid aside his bow and arrows, renounced his righteous wrath, and re-assumed the face of compassion and lovingkindness.

Rama said to Lakshmana, "It is now time to install Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka. Always loyal and devoted, he has faithfully served me in my difficult years."

Lakshmana replied happily, "It will be done."

He placed golden jars in the hands of the *vanara* chiefs, instructing them to fill them with water from the sea.

They returned with the water. Lakshmana installed Vibhishana on a magnificent dais and, taking a splendidly-decorated jar, he consecrated Vibhishana king of Lanka in accordance with the tradition of royal anointing.

Hanuman said to lotus-eyed Rama, "It is proper that you my lord, should visit Sita devi. She has heard of your victory, and she is weeping tears of joy; she pines for you, my lord. She said to me, 'I wish to see my husband,' and her eyes dimmed and became moist."

Rama's eyes filled with tears.

He sighed, stared at the ground, and said to Vibhishana, "After bathing her head, sprinkling her with celestial perfumes, and adorning her with the finest jewels, bring Sita here. Let there be no delay."

Vibhishana, lord of the rakshasas, joined his palms in *anjali* before Sita and, raising them to his forehead, said, "Princess of Videha, perfumed and ornamented, enter this palanquin. May you prosper, lovely lady. Your husband wishes to see you."

Sita replied, "There is no need for me to bathe first. I wish to see my husband now."

Vibhishana replied, "But it is the command of your husband Rama. You should do as he says."

Sita, who looked upon her husband as a god and whose bhakti for him was boundless, said, "Very well."

Hair dressed elegantly, body brilliantly bedecked and bejewelled, Sita entered the panoplied palanquin, escorted by rakshasas.

Vibhishana saw noble-minded Rama deep in thought, but approached, offered *pranamas*, and joyfully announced the arrival of Sita.

Hearing that Sita, who had spent such a long time in the abode of a rakshasa, had arrived, anger, joy, and disgust surged in Rama.

Upset at seeing Sita come in a palanquin, Rama said to Vibhishana, "Supreme lord of all the rakshasas, you who have always rejoiced in my victories, allow Sita to come nearer."

Vibhishana, eager to abide by dharma, dismissed the assembled *vanaras*.

Rakshasa guards, in armour and bright head dresses, dispersed the tree-men, cave-dwellers and night-prowlers, prodding them away from the palanquin with sticks.

They scattered, but watched from a distance.

There was a great noise, as if the ocean was being lashed by a storm.

Rama heard the clamorous discontent, and angrily glanced at the rakshasa guards. A mixture of affection and resentment stirred inside him.

Indignantly he asked highly learned Vibhishana, "What are you doing? Why are you harassing my people? Are these my orders? Stop it at once!

"Not walls, not veils, not seclusion, not royal decree shield a woman's honour.

"A woman's honour is her character.

"A woman can appear in public in times of peril, in wartime, during a *svayamvara*, at a religious sacrifice, and during a wedding.

"Sita is in distress. There is no harm in her appearing in public, specially when I am present.

"Let her come out of the palanquin, and approach me on foot. Allow the forest-dwellers to look at the princess of Videha."

Vibhishana escorted Sita dignifiedly into Rama's presence.

Lakshmana, Sugriva and Hanuman were distressed by Rama's order. Observing Rama's harsh behaviour, they concluded that he was displeased with Sita.

Shrinking into herself from shyness, Sita modestly approached her husband.

She who revered her husband as a god gazed with astonishment, delight and love at his handsome face.

His face shone like the full moon after a long period of absence and darkness. Tiredness left her body, and her face shone too, like a full moon.

Rama looked intently at Sita standing graciously bowed in front of him, and quickly expressed the feelings hidden in his heart.

"Fortune-favoured lady, I have defeated my enemy in battle, and won you back. I have done what I set out to do. I have achieved the reward of my righteous wrath. I have wiped out the insult and the insulter. My manliness is proved, my struggle is vindicated, I am once more lord of myself. Though a mere mortal, I have avenged the wrong done to you by the fickle-minded rakshasa Ravana. It was destined to be so, and I have redressed the destined misdeed. What use is strength to those who waver, what good is irresolution when revenge is required?

"Hanuman leapt across the ocean and destroyed Lanka, and he is today rewarded. Sugriva was zealously loyal and served me well on the battlefield; he is also rewarded. So is Vibhishana, who gave up a virtueless brother and sought my refuge."

Sita looked at Rama as he said this. There were tears in her large fawn-eyes.

Rama's heart was torn in two when he saw her standing and looking at him. She was the beloved of his heart, but he also feared

public scandal.

In front of the *vanaras* and *rakshasas*, he said to wavy-haired, lotus-eyed, graceful-limbed Sita:

*“By killing Ravana,
I have avenged the insult
He did to my honour.
I have won you back,
Though this was as difficult
As conquest of the south
By the ascetic Agastya.
But understand this well!
This war, this struggle,
In which friends helped,
Was not for your sake.
May you prosper, Sita!
Do not misunderstand.
I did what I did
To wipe out the shame
On my family name.
And now, with rumours
Everywhere floating
Regarding your character,
Your presence hurts like
Bright light to sore eyes.
So go where you will,
Daughter of Janaka—
I give you leave.
I have no more need of you.
What man of honour
Will take back a woman
Who has lived in the house
Of another, just because
She loved him once?
Ravana looked lustfully
At you, clutched you tight
In his arms . . .
And do you expect
A man of my lineage*

*To accept you again?
 I have won the war,
 My honour's redeemed,
 I have no feeling for you.
 You can go where you please.
 I have made up my mind.
 My decision is final.
 Choose Lakshmana or Bharata,
 Whoever you please,
 Or Shatrughna, Sugriva,
 Or the rakshasa Vibhishana.
 The choice is yours, Sita.
 You are so lovely,
 So mind-alluring,
 How could Ravana
 Have controlled himself
 And not enjoyed you?"*

Hearing these unloving words from her beloved husband, self-respecting Sita, who in the past had heard only loving words, wept bitterly. She swayed like a creeper harshly brushed by the trunk of an elephant.

She horripilated.

Ashamed, she stood in the presence of the multitude of witnesses, enduring the reproach of her husband.

Rama's words pierced her like arrows

She seemed to shrink into herself.

Tears streamed down her face. Wiping them away she spoke falteringly:

*"Why do you speak to me,
 O my heroic husband,
 As any ordinary man
 To any ordinary woman?
 Such words,
 Such terrible words!
 Have faith in me—
 I am not what you think I am,
 My character is pure.*

*Is it right to judge
All women by the wicked
Ways of some women?
How can you doubt me?—
Don't you know me?
It was Ravana who touched me,
I did not touch Ravana.
I was not free, my lord:
My fate is to blame.
What could I do,
I was helpless, Ravana
Overpowered my body.
What I could control—
My heart—was faithful
And is faithful to you.
If, after so many years
Of living together
And loving each other,
You still do not know me,
Then I am finished,
I am finished forever.*

*When you sent Hanuman
To find me, tell me, raja,
What prevented you then
From repudiating me?
Had Hanuman told me
You did not want me,
I would have killed myself
Then and there, my lord.
What was the need
Of this useless war,
Of so much killing,
Of so many demands
On so many friends?
Everything fruitless,
Everything in vain!
And your behaviour,
O jewel among men,*

*Your angry dismissal
 Of virtuous womankind—
 Is this anything
 But small and shabby?
 I am called Janaki,
 Daughter of Janaka,
 But I was born of the earth,
 I am Sita the Furrow.
 Did you ever consider
 My exalted birth
 Before passing judgment?
 Did you ever consider
 Your hand pressing mine
 When we were married?
 Do my bhakti and chastity
 Mean nothing to you?"*

Choking with grief, Sita turned to Lakshmana and said, "Lakshmana, raise a pyre for me. It is the only cure for my grief. I have been accused falsely, I do not want to live any more. I will enter fire. My husband has renounced me publicly. He has no faith in my virtue."

Agitated, Lakshmana glanced towards Rama. From the expression on Rama's face, he realised what Rama wanted done. Lakshmana prepared the pyre.

No one dared so much as speak or even look at Rama, who stood firm as Kala at the dissolution of the universe.

Sita respectfully half-circled Rama in *pradakshina* and, with head bowed, approached the blazing fire.

She *pranamed* the gods and Brahmins and with palms joined in *anjali* whispered in front of the fire:

*"Because my heart has never
 Turned away from Rama,
 May the god of fire,
 The witness of the world,
 Protect me!
 Because Rama accuses me
 Though I am innocent,*



*May the god of fire,
The witness of the world,
Protect me!
Because I have never,
In thought, word, or deed,
Been unfaithful to Rama,
May the god of fire
Protect me!
Because the god of the sun
And the god of wind,
Because the moon-god and
The gods of the quarters,
Because the gods of the morning
And the samdhyas and night
And of earth, and all other gods,
Respect my character,
May the god of fire
Protect me!"*

Sita half-circled the flames and fearlessly stepped inside the fire. A multitude of children and elders witnessed the entry of Sita in the fire.

She was wearing gold ornaments, she glowed like gold as she stepped into the fire, while everyone watched.

The creatures of the world saw large-eyed Sita step into the fire.

Rishis and gods and Gandharvas saw the fortune-favoured lady step into the fire, the consumer of oblations.

And the women screamed when they saw Sita fall inside the fire like a continuous stream of ghee in the sacred flames of a sacrifice.

And the gods and Gandharvas and Danavas witnessed Sita fall into the fire like a goddess that falls from heaven to hell as the result of a curse.

As she stepped into the flames, a loud, piercing, eerie wail arose from the rakshasas and *vanaras*.

Rama heard the lamentations of the people, and wondered. His eyes filled with tears,

Yama, and Indra, and Varuna, Shiva and Brahma sped towards Lanka to meet Rama.

The gods said to Rama, "Creator of the universe, lord of all, Self-Born One, how is it that you are unaware of your divinity? You are the chief of the gods!"

Rama, devotee of dharma, scion of Raghu, asked:

*"I am Rama,
I am a human being,
Dasharatha's son.
Tell me, O Brahma—
Who really am I?
From where have I come?"*

Brahma, greatest of knowers of Brahma, replied to Rama:

*"You are Narayana,
Armed with the chakra.
You are Truth that begins,
Truth that grows,
And Truth that ends.
You are the Dharma
That rules the worlds.
You are Krishna,
You are the origin and end.
You are Vishnu,
The lotus-navelled lord.
I am your heart,
Devi Sarasvati your tongue.
The cosmos is your body,
The earth your seat.
Sita is Devi Lakshmi,
You are Vishnu.
You were born human
To destroy Ravana.
Your end is accomplished:
Dharma is saved!"*

As soon as Brahma finished his eulogy of Rama, the god of fire extinguished the pyre and stepped forward with Sita in his arms.

She was dressed in red, she was as lustrous as the rising sun, she had dark wavy hair in which were flowers unsinged by the flames.

Unscathed she emerged, and the god of fire restored her to Rama.

The god of fire, witness of the worlds, said:

*“Here is your wife Sita,
Totally without stain.
She was never unfaithful
In thought, word, or glance.
Ravana abducted her.
She kept herself pure,
Thinking only of you,
Devoted only to you.
Take her back now.
I command you now
To be gentle with her.”*

Rama's heart filled with joy. Dharmatma Rama wept. He replied to the god of fire:

*“It was essential
That Sita be tested
By the Fire Ordeal
To convince my subjects.
She is lovely, she
Lived in the palace
Of Ravana for long.
Had I not tested her,
They would have murmured,
‘Rama lusts for her.’
I know too well
She is devoted to me.
Ravana could never
Violate chaste Sita,
Who's ringed by her virtue*

*As the sea by its shores.
 I am firm in truth,
 So I checked myself
 From preventing her
 When she entered the flames.
 Ravana would not dare
 Touch Sita, for she is
 A radiant tongue of fire.
 Sita is to me
 As sunlight to the sun.
 I can no more spurn her
 Than good name can be spurned
 By a man of character.
 Loving lords of the world,
 I will heed your advice."*

So Rama was re-united with his beloved wife and experienced deep joy.

The aerial chariot Pushpaka was readied to take Rama and Sita to Ayodhya. Vibhishana stood respectfully near.

Commanded by Rama, the chariot, pulled by swans, rose into the sky. Seated in it were Rama and Sita, and the chief tree-men, cave-dwellers, and rakshasas.

Turning to Sita, whose face shone with the brilliance of the moon, Rama said, "Below there is the spot where the bridge was constructed over the ocean. Over there is where we pitched camp before the assault on Lanka. And there is Kishkindha with its enchanting forests, where I killed Bali."

"Look, Sita," Rama added, "over there is Lake Pampa which abounds in blue lotuses. On its banks I met the noble-minded lady Shabari. And over there is white-watered Godavari where sage Agastya has his ashram. This is Shringavera—this is the river Sarayu—and here, at last, is Ayodhya."

Soon after the Pushpaka landed gracefully, Bharata hurried joyfully to meet Rama.

He did *anjali* before Rama with joined palms, and offered *arghya*-water with which to wash his feet.

Children and adults, young and old, women and men rushed to welcome Rama.

Shouts of "Rama is here! Rama has returned!" rent the skies.

Bharata embraced Sugriva, saying, "We are four brothers—but you shall be the fifth, Sugriva. Kindness is the root of friendship; malice is the root of enmity."

Hundreds of thousands of hands rose in respectful greeting to Rama, like a gigantic lotus flower suddenly blossoming in Ayodhya.

Bharata tied Rama's sandals on his brother's feet and said, with palms joined in *anjali*, "I kept your kingdom for you in trust. I give it back to you today. My duty is over. You are the lord of Ayodhya. Inspect your palace, your treasury, your storehouses and your army—I have increased them tenfold in your absence, thanks to your grace."

Led by the sage Vasishtha, the ministers of Raja Dasharatha said, "We must prepare for the coronation of Rama, who fully deserves the honour."

Shatrughna carried the royal umbrella, Sugriva waved the yaktail fan, and Vibhishana waved another chowrie as radiantly white as moonlight.

Rama gave Sita a pearl necklace strung with other precious gems gleaming like moonrays, as well as beautiful dresses, richly embroidered and ornamented.

*This is Valmiki's epic,
It grants dharma and power,
Longevity and victory
To rajas . . .
Who listens to this epic
Is saved from misfortune.
Women will get sons
As Kaushalya, Rama and Lakshmana,
And Kaikeyi, Bharata.
Who controls his anger
And listens with faith*

*To the Ramayana
Will crush all obstacles.
Tensions disappear
In the houses where
The Ramayana is read.
The reader of the Ramayana,
If a king, will conquer the earth;
If a traveller, will find his destination;
If a sinner, will be cleansed.*

*For this is the epic of Rama,
Who is Vishnu,
Who is Narayana,
The Eternal Divinity.
May all prosper!
May they all recite
This epic with faith!
May health and renown
And love and wisdom
Go with the reader
Of the sacred Ramayana.*

BOOK SEVEN

Uttara-Kanda

(AFTERMATH)

Rama went to the Ashoka garden in the inner apartments of his palace, where *champak*, mango, sandalwood, *vakula* and other trees blossomed in breathtaking beauty.

*Thick-foliaged trees,
Trees like tongues of flame,
Trees black as collyrium,
Trees brilliant as gold,
Trees with singing kokilas,
Finely-fragrant trees . . .
As Indra to Shachi,
Rama offered honey-wine
With his own hands to Sita.
And apsaras sang, and
Irresistibly handsome Rama,
Dharmatma Rama,
Captivated the hearts
Of the dancing apsaras . . .
Rama was like a god
And Sita like a goddess,
And he pleased Sita
Each day with fresh delights.
So the days passed,
Each enjoying the other,
Felicity on felicity.
Dharma-knowing Rama
Conducted the government
With dharma in the mornings,
And the evenings he passed
With Sita in the garden.*

Seeing Sita radiant, Rama exclaimed delightedly one day after the spring had passed, "*Sadhu! Sadhu! Excellent! Excellent!*"

To Sita, who was like a daughter of the gods, Rama said, "Lovely-hipped lady, I am pleased to see you pregnant. What are your puerperal longings? What can I do to please you?"

Sita smiled and replied, "I wish only to go to the banks of the Ganga and pay my homage to the sages who subsist there on roots, shoots and fruits. If I could spend even one night there, among

the root-and-fruit-eating *rishis* . . .!"

Rama said, "What you desire will be done; Sita. Tomorrow you will be escorted there."

Saying this, Rama went with his friends to the central court of the palace.

He passed the time in light banter with Vijaya, Madhumatta, Kashyapa, Mangala, Kula, Suraji, Kaliya, Bhadra, Dantavakra, and Sumagadha. They cracked jokes and exchanged amusing anecdotes.

Suddenly Rama turned to Bhadra.

"Tell me, Bhadra," he asked, "What's the talk of the town and the village these days? What do the people say about Sita, Bharata, and Lakshmana? What about Shatrughna and our mother Kaikeyi? Rajas are always criticised in village and in city."

Bhadra joined his palms in *anjali* and said respectfully, "Sire, only good is spoken about you. They say you are the great victor, that you killed ten-headed Ravana."

"Yes, I did," said Rama, "but don't be circumspect. Tell me, truthfully, what's said about me. Only when I know the truth can I improve myself by pursuing what's good and avoiding what's harmful. You have nothing to fear. I give you my word. But I must have the truth, for I hear all kinds of rumours."

"On roads, in markets, public parks and woods," replied Bhadra, "this is what the people are saying. Whether good or bad I do not know, but this is what they say—'Rama has performed an extraordinary feat. He has crossed the ocean by building a bridge over it. The gods and Danavas could not have equalled his excellence. He has killed the never-vanquished Ravana, and organised the treemen, cave-dwellers and rakshasas under his command. He has brought back Sita and accepted her into his house. Not once did it occur to him that this is not right. How can he allow himself to enjoy Sita? Does he not realise that she was abducted by Ravana, who forced her to sit on his lap? Didn't he feel disgust at the thought that Sita was held captive in Lanka in the Ashoka grove and physically mishandled by rakshasis? Our wives will have to put up with similar insults, for what a raja does, his subjects follow.' Sire, these are the words of the people in city and village."

Rama, aghast, asked the others, "Tell me frankly, you have also the same feelings, don't you?"

They touched their heads on the ground in front of him in *pranama* and replied, "Yes, Sire. What Bhadra says is true."

Rama dismissed them, and reflected alone for a while; then he ordered the doorkeeper:

"Summon Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna to my presence."

Deeply disturbed, Rama said to his brothers who sat pensive in front of him:

*"Listen to me!
Listen to me carefully!
And may you prosper!
These are the feelings
Of Ayodhya's citizens
About me and Sita.
They condemn my action;
Their attitude is painful.
I was born in the family
Of the great Ikshvakus,
Sita is the daughter
Of noble-minded Janaka.
Dear Lakshmana,
You know how Ravana
Abducted Sita, and how
I attacked and killed him.
It occurred to me then,
'How can I take Sita
Back to Ayodhya?'
To calm my fears,
Sita, in my presence
And with gods as witnesses,
Entered the pyre.
The fire proved her pure,
So did the Moon and the Sun
And the sky-coursing Wind
In front of all the*

*Assembled gods and rishis.
My heart told me
Sita was chaste.
Taking her with me,
I returned to Ayodhya.
But in my own kingdom
I am blamed, in city
And village I am blamed.
Sadness overcomes me.
So long as misbehaviour,
Anyone's misbehaviour,
Is the target of rumours,
That man is defamed.
Good deed is god-honoured,
Ill deed condemned;
That is why noble minds
Are motivated to good deed.
Excellent brothers, to me
Public shame is heinous;
To avoid public shame
I will surrender my life,
I will gladly
Renounce all of you!
To renounce Sita in fact
Is an easier duty.
Look at me, my brothers!
I'm drowning in sorrow,
I have never experienced
Misfortune so miserable!*

*With Sumantra as charioteer,
Tomorrow, Lakshmana.
At dawn take Sita
And abandon her
Outside my kingdom.
Not far from the Ganga,
On the bank of the Tamasa,
Is the celestial ashram
Of mahatma Valmiki;*

*Leave her somewhere there
 In a secluded spot.
 Hurry, Lakshmana,
 Carry out my order.
 No arguments, please.
 Any hesitation will
 Deeply displease me.
 I swear by my feet,
 I swear by my life
 That anyone who objects
 To my decision becomes
 My bitter enemy.
 If you respect me,
 Then obey my command.
 Take away Sita
 This very instant.
 Only a while ago
 Sita said to me,
 'I am eager to visit
 The ashrams on the Ganga.'
 Fulfil her desire.'*

His eyes brimming with tears, and sighing heavily like an elephant, Rama, accompanied by brothers, returned to his palace room.

Night passed. Early next morning Lakshmana went to Sita and said to her:

"Your husband the king has asked that I fulfil the desire you expressed to him of visiting the ashrams. I have the chariot ready to take you to the ashrams of the *rishis* on the banks of the Ganga. Devi, come with me."

Noble-minded Lakshmana's words delighted Sita. She put on her finest dress and adorned herself with exquisite jewellery, and said, "I will distribute these and other clothes and jewels to the wives of the sages."

"So be it," said Lakshmana.

Keeping in mind Rama's order, he helped Sita into the chariot

and urged the swift horses forward.

Sita said to auspicious-sign-marked Lakshmana:

*"I see ill omens.
O joy of the Raghavas,
My left eye twitches,
My body trembles,
My mind's giddy,
I feel strangely uneasy,
I am suddenly weak,
The earth seems deserted . . .
Is your brother well?
I hope my mothers-in-law
Are all well. May all
In the kingdom prosper!"*

Sita joined her palms in *anjali* and prayed to the gods. Lakshmana lowered his head; he was pleased and impressed with her; he said in a choking voice, "May all prosper."

They reached the banks of the Gomati, and passed the night in an ashram. Early at dawn Lakshmana said to his charioteer Sumantra, "Hurry! Today, like Shiva, I plan to revere the sacred waters of the Ganga by pouring them on my head."

Sumantra joined his palms in *anjali* and requested Sita to climb into the chariot.

Large-eyed Sita, Lakshmana and wise Sumantra came to the sin-cleansing waters of the Ganga in the afternoon.

Lakshmana broke down and started weeping.

Wise-in-dharma Sita, distressed and wishing to help, asked:

"What is wrong, Lakshmana? Why are you crying? We have arrived at the eagerly-longed-for bank of the Ganga. This is a time to be happy. Why are you sad? You make me uneasy and worried. Are you sad because you have not been with Rama for two days? I love Rama more than my life, Lakshmana, yet even I am not as upset as you. Don't be a little boy! We must hurry and go to the other bank of the Ganga where I will distribute the jewels and clothes after having a darshan of the sages. We will revere the *maha-rishis*, spend the night in the ashram, and return to Ayodhya. How I long to see lotus-eyed and lion-chested Rama again!"

Foe-crushing Lakshmana wiped his shining eyes, hailed the ferryman, and said to Sita with palms joined in *anjali*, "The boat is ready."

Lakshmana carefully escorted Sita across to the other bank of the Ganga.

Reaching there, he did *anjali* and, his eyes brimming with tears, said:

"Rama is wise, but he has entrusted, me with a thorn-like task which, if completed, will shame me in the eyes of the world. Better I died today than keep his word. I should have said no to him earlier. Lovey lady, be noble and forgive me for doing this."

Saying this, Lakshmana slumped on the earth.

Seeing him doing continuous *anjali* before her and crying copiously, Sita was deeply disturbed.

"What is the matter?" she asked Lakshmana. "I can't understand anything. Tell me the truth, Lakshmana! Why are you gripped by despair? Is the king well? I charge you in the name of the king, tell me what is troubling you. You have my permission; do not hold back anything."

Lakshmana bowed his head. Tears choked his voice as he spoke:

"They blamed him in the court, saying rumours were afloat everywhere in the kingdom. Rama told me all about it. I cannot tell you all that he said to me. There are accusations, devi, that have hurt him terribly. I will not discuss them with you.

"I know you are blameless, yet Rama, afraid of public censure, has repudiated you. Do not misunderstand him, devi. I have to carry out his command and leave you near the ashrams here. That was your wish too, after all.

"The abodes of the Brahma-*rishis* on the banks of the Ganga are holy and beautiful places of *tapasya*, so do not grieve. All will be well. The illustrious sage Valmiki was a friend of your father-in-law, Raja Dasharatha. Take refuge at the feet of noble-minded Valmiki and be happy, O daughter of Janaka.

"Devi, cherish Rama in your heart and be always devoted to him. That is the way to achieve the highest happiness."

Lakshmana's cruel words hurt Sita; she collapsed and lay unconscious on the forest floor. Recovering after some time, she said weeping profusely:

*"I see now, Lakshmana,
I was made for sorrow,
My body fashioned for grief.
All the world's pain
Is my lot today.
What great sin did I do
In my previous life,
Which poor girl's marriage
Did I frustrate,
That I should suffer so—
That my husband Rama
Should repudiate
His innocent wife?
I followed his footsteps
During his exile,
In all his misfortunes
I remained content.
Tell me, dear Lakshmana,
How will I survive
Alone and abandoned?
When the sages ask me
Why I was abandoned,
Tell me, my lord Rama,
What answer will I give?
What is my sin?
What wrong have I done?
I dare not throw myself
In the Ganga's waters—
For that will be the end
Of my husband's line!
Very well, Lakshmana,
Carry out your command,
Abandon me here.
What else can you do
Except obey the king?
But listen to me—
Go and do anjali
To my mothers-in-law,
Go and touch the feet*

*Of my husband the king,
And wish him well.
Tell him I said so.
With bowed head convey
My respects to the ladies
Of the inner apartments,
And to the king,
Who knows what dharma is,
Say this—say I said,
'Yow know I am chaste,
You know the truth,
You know Sita always
Cherished in her heart
Deep bhakti for you,
Deep love for you—
And yet, brave hero,
Fearing dishonour,
Ashamed of criticism,
Alarmed by rumours,
You have spurned me.
My lord, my refuge,
You should not have done so.'
Tell him also, Lakshmana,
For he knows royal dharma,
'As you treat your brothers,
So treat your subjects.
This is your highest dharma,
This will exalt you.
By such dharma a king
Finds eternal fame.
I do not mind, my lord,
The sorrows I suffer—
More important it is
Your honour remains intact.
A wife's god is her husband,
He is her friend,
He is her guru.
Even her life is less
Than her husband's happiness.'*

*Repeat this to Rama.
And before you go, note:
My periods are over,
You see me pregnant."*

Lakshmana listened and did not reply. In his anguish he bowed his head and stared at the ground.

He half-circled her in *pradakshina* while she stood weeping.

After some time he said, "Pure lady, what are you saying? How can I look at you? I have never in the past raised my eyes above your gracious feet. How can I, in Rama's absence, look at you abandoned by him in the forest?"

He gave Sita a *namaskara* and stepped into the boat.

"Take me to the other shore," he ordered the ferryman.

As the chariot raced ahead on the other bank, he turned his head back again and again to have a last glimpse of Sita as she wandered forlorn and bewildered.

She saw the chariot and Lakshmana receding in the distance. Overwhelmed with grief, illustrious Sita, alone and unprotected in that forest echoing with the plaintive call of peacocks, broke down and wept uncontrollably.

The sons of some *rishis* saw Sita weeping. They ran to *maha-rishi* Valmiki, touched his feet and said:

"She must be the wife of a noble-minded man. She is like the goddess Shri herself. We saw her sitting by herself, crying. Come and see her, sir! She must be a goddess come to earth."

Wise-in-dharma Valmiki, by the strength of his *tapasya*, intuited the truth, and he hurried with them to the spot where Sita sat, weeping.

He spoke to her sweetly:

*"Devoted wife of Rama!
Daughter-in-law of Dasharatha!
Daughter of Janaka!
The strength of my
Singleminded dharma
Has shown me the truth.*

*I know all that happens
 In the three worlds.
 I know all about you.
 The vision of my tapasya
 Confirms your chastity.
 Do not fear, Sita—
 You are under my protection.
 Not far from my ashram
 Are lady ascetics
 Absorbed in tapasya.
 They will care for you
 As their own daughter.
 Forget your fears, child—
 Treat this as your home."*

Sita, joining her palms in *anjali*, followed Valmiki. The lady ascetics joyfully welcomed her.

Valmiki said, "This is Sita, chaste wife of Rama, Dasharatha's daughter-in-law, daughter of Janaka. She is blameless, but her husband has abandoned her. We must therefore look after her affectionately. I am your guru, and I charge you to be kind to her. Give her your love and *puja*."

Leaving Sita to the tender care of the lady ascetics Valmiki and his disciples returned to his ashram.

Lakshmana returned to Ayodhya after passing one night on the bank of the river Keshini.

His mind was troubled.

He thought: *It will be easy enough to bend and touch Rama's feet, but what will I say to him?*

He entered the palace.

He saw his elder brother Rama resplendent on the throne. Approaching him reverentially, Lakshmana noticed that Rama was lost in pensive absent-mindedness; his own eyes filled with tears; he did *anjali* and said sadly:

"As you ordered, I abandoned the daughter of Janaka on the bank of the Ganga near the beautiful ashram of Valmiki. I left her at the very entrance of the ashram. I have returned to touch your

feet and do as you further command me.

"There is no use grieving, O tiger among men. Such is Kala; Time has its way. You are intelligent and experienced in the ways of the world—why should you feel remorse? What grows, decays; what rises, falls; we meet to separate; we live to die. Separation from son, wife, relatives, wealth is inevitable; be prepared, be stable, be detached.

"You have the strength to control your atman with your atman, you have the power to control your mind with your mind, you are the controller of the worlds—why should it be difficult for you to control grief? For if you fall prey to grief, fresh rumours will fly. What will your people think of you?

"Cast off weakness, excellent brother, and be firm of mind."

Rama listened to the advice of his noble-minded brother Lakshmana and replied:

"You are right, Lakshmana. I am pleased that you have carried out my order. Your soothing words have consoled me. I will cast off grief, and strive for peace of mind."

Early in the morning, in the soft light of dawn, lotus-eyed Raja Rama performed his meditations and, eager to pursue the dharma of royal administration, summoned his leading citizens and Brahmins to the council chamber.

In that splendid assembly, which resembled the council halls of Indra, Yama and Varuna, were learned men including the *purohita* Vasishtha and *rishi* Kashyapa and others well-versed in the subtleties of dharma.

"Go, Lakshmana," Rama said, "to the palace gate and summon the petitioners inside."

Lakshmana went out. He returned and said, "There is no one in the kingdom who is in need of anything."

Rama, delighted, repeated, "But go again, Lakshmana, and look more carefully. There must not be even a hint of adharma in my kingdom."

Lakshmana noticed a dog squatting near the gate. The dog stared fixedly at him, and emitted a slow, whining wail.

"What is the matter?" asked Lakshmana. "Why have you come here? Tell me. You have nothing to fear."

The dog replied, "I wish to speak to Rama, the invincible hero who is the refuge of all creatures and whose presence makes all fearless."

Lakshmana reported the incident to Rama. Then, coming out to the gate, he said to the dog, "If you have anything important to say, you are welcome to come inside and speak to the king in person."

The dog replied: "We are low-born creatures, sir. We are unworthy of entering the temple where a god abides, or the palace of a king, or the dwelling of a Brahmin, where fire, Indra, sun and wind are present. I cannot enter the palace, for the king is the embodiment of dharma, he is always truthful, he is skilled in the arts of war, and he always seeks the welfare of all creatures. He is all-knowing, all-seeing, he is Rama the ruler of the hearts of his subjects. He is the moon, the sun, Agni, Yama, Kubera, Indra of a hundred sacrifices, Surya and Varuna. Tell Rama, the protector of his subjects, that I cannot enter his palace without his special permission."

Shining, fortune-favoured Lakshmana re-entered the palace and said to Rama:

"Strong-armed son of Kaushalya, I have carried out your instructions. Waiting outside the gate is a dog who has a grievance."

Rama replied, "Whoever it is, usher him in without delay."

The dog's head was bleeding. He said to Rama:

*"The raja is the lord
Of creatures, their saviour!
When others sleep,
The raja is awake,
Working for their welfare.
The raja cherishes dharma,
He follows tradition
And safeguards the good.
If the raja is remiss,
His people perish.
The raja's the master,
He is the father,
He is Kala, he is Yuga,
He is the universe.*

*Dharma makes things stable,
 Dharma holds together
 All the three worlds.
 The discipline of dharma
 Curbs the destructive,
 So the raja is Dharana
 The Sustaining Upholder.
 He receives the fruits
 Of sustaining dharma
 In the next life,
 For nothing is higher
 Anywhere than dharma.
 This is my view.
 Charity, compassion,
 Puja of the learned,
 And a simple life-style
 Are the essence of dharma.
 The followers of dharma
 Are happy in this life
 And in the next.
 O strict-vowed Rama,
 O final arbiter,
 Whom the holy revere
 As a model of dharma,
 O ocean of goodness,
 O storehouse of dharma,
 Forgive my impertinence
 For saying what I say.
 With my head at your feet,
 I seek your grace.
 Do not be angry."*

To these words of the dog Rama replied, "Speak! Do not fear."
 The dog continued:

*"A raja rules by dharma,
 Protects by dharma,
 By dharma he removes
 Fear from his subjects.*

*Keeping this in mind,
Rama, listen to me.
A mendicant Brahmin
Named Sarvatha-siddha
Has injured my head
For no fault of mine."*

Rama ordered his door-keeper to bring Sarvatha-siddha to the palace.

"Blameless Sire," asked Sarvatha-siddha, "why have I been summoned here?"

Rama said to him:

*"You have hurt this dog.
Why? For what fault?
Anger is a deadly enemy,
Anger is an enemy
Disguised as a friend,
Anger is a sharp sword
That slashes all virtues,
Anger cancels the merits
Of tapasya and sacrifice
And charity.*

*Give up anger!
Anger is a wild stallion
Of indulgence.*

*Starve it!
In thought, speech, and sight,
Be good to others.
Give up hate, harm none.
No sword, no snake,
No roused enemy
Harms more than a mind
Possessed by anger.
Character cannot be hidden.
Conceal it how you will,
Misdeed will out."*

Sarvatha-siddha, finest of the twice-born, said, "One day I was

wandering begging for alms; I was tired, and angrily hit at the dog. He was squatting in the middle of the road, obstructing me; I told him 'Make way'—which he did, taking his time. I was famished, I lost my temper, and I cracked his skull with my staff. I am guilty. Punish me, O raja of rajas, and save me from the peril of hell."

Rama turned to his ministers and enquired, "What should be the right punishment for him? Justice must be done. Nothing restores confidence more in people's minds than punishment that fits the crime."

Bhrigu, Angiras, Kutsa, Vasishtha, Kashyapa, and pandits and others skilled in the niceties and intricacies of dharma said, "A Brahmin cannot be punished—this is the considered opinion of those who are expert in raja-dharma."

Turning to Rama, the ascetics said, "A raja is the ultimate arbiter, and you are the lord of the three worlds, you are Eternal Vishnu himself—so your word is law."

The dog suddenly spoke up, "If you really wish to act as I would like you to act, then listen to me. You asked me, 'What can I do for you?' Appoint this Brahmin the spiritual maharaja of the Kalanjara monastery. That is what will please me."

Rama ordered the appointment, and the delighted Brahmin was honoured as the spiritual head and placed atop an elephant.

Rama's ministers were upset. "Illustratious Sire," they protested, "this can hardly be described as punishment. You have not deterred or shamed him, you have exalted him."

"You do not know what karma is," replied Rama. "The dog knows."

Questioned by Rama, the dog said, "I was once the head of the Kalanjara monastery. I offered puja to the gods and Brahmins, and cared for the male and female menials. I performed all the sacred duties and guarded the holy possessions. I left nothing undone. In spite of my devotion, I was re-born as a dog. Consider then this Brahmin, who is a victim of his own anger and who practises adharma. He is unfit to be a spiritual head. He will defile seven generations of his family with his misconduct. How can a man be put in charge of gods, cows, and Brahmins when his uncontrollable temper is sure to lead his children, his friends, and his domestic animals to hell? Anyone who steals from Brahmins, gods, women,

and children is doomed; so is anyone who takes back the gift he has freely donated. Even the very thought of stealing from gods and Brahmins will place a man in the lowest hell of all."

Rama gazed in wide-eyed wonder at the dog, who, having said this, disappeared. Born noble, he had been re-born in a lower state as a dog; but now he was fortunate to go to Varanasi where he ended his life by renouncing all food and water in the hope of attaining a better re-birth.

In the meantime Sita gave birth to twin sons. The young disciples of the ashram brought the auspicious news to their guru Valmiki.

"Revered sir," they said, "Rama's wife has given birth to twin sons. Please perform their birth rites."

Maha-rishi Valmiki hurried to the birth room. The infants shone with the radiance of the moon; they looked like two babies of the gods.

He saw them, and his heart suffused with joy.

Quickly he performed the *rakshasa* rite to avert and nullify ill omens.

Twice-born Valmiki picked up a fistful of kusha grass and chanted:

*"With the blades of this kusha grass
Charged with mantras,
I stroke the first child:
His name will be Kusha.
With the blades of this grass
Is the second child laved:
He will be Lava.
Kusha and Lava—
Their fame will dazzle the earth."*

In Ayodhya an old Brahmin villager turned up at the gate of the palace with the corpse of a child in his arms.

He wept ceaselessly, he was delirious, and he wailed over and over, "Oh my son! My son!"

He moaned, "What terrible crime did I commit in my past life to deserve the death of my only son in this!

*He is still a child—
 Not yet fourteen.
 O my dear son,
 Soon I and your mother
 Will die of grief.
 What did I do?
 I never spoke a lie,
 I injured no animal,
 I harmed no human.
 I have never heard of any others
 Dying before their time
 In the auspicious reigon of Rama.
 It is Rama then who is guilty
 If innocent children die
 When he sits on the throne.
 Raja! Ramal
 Return me my son
 Or I and my wife will take our lives
 In front of your gate—
 And you will be guilty
 Of the murder of Brahmins!
 If, after killing Brahmins,
 You can still be happy,
 Then be happy, O Ramal
 Live long!
 Be happy with your brothers!
 But we will be insecure,
 For there is no safety for children
 In the kingdom of Rama,
 Who styles himself a mahatma ruler
 Of the Ikshvaku dynasty!
 Only when a raja fails in his duties
 Do such heinous things happen:
 Crimes flourish,
 Death comes prematurely,
 Chaos prevails.”*

Rama summoned his eight excellent Brahmin advisers, Markandeya, Maudgalya, Vamadeva, Kashyapa, Katyayana, Jabali,

Gautama and Narada. He offered them seats and did *anjali*.

After the shining-with-discipline advisers had relaxed, Rama informed them of the accusations of the Brahmin at the gate.

Narada sensed the agitation of Rama and offered this serene advice:

*“Listen, king, to the reason
For the child’s untimely death,
After which, do what you think is right.
In the Krita-yuga,
Brahmins practised tapasya;
Only Brahmins did so;
Having done so, they achieved Brahman.
In that yuga,
There were no untimely deaths,
Wisdom was the rule.*

*In the Treta-yuga,
Kshatriyas practised tapasya;
They were brave, heroic, determined;
They equalled the Brahmins.
In the Treta-yuga,
The four castes were created.
Brahmins and Kshatriyas practised tapasya,
The Vaishyas traded,
The Shudras offered puja to the first three castes.
Each caste followed its sva-dharma.*

*In the Dvapara-yuga,
Adharma increased,
Irregularities proliferated,
Vaishyas practised tapasya,
The three castes followed dharma through tapasya,
But the Shudras, O king,
Were forbidden to do so.
In the Kali-yuga, indeed,
Is possible for a Shudra to do tapasya,
But for him to do so in the Dvapara
It is a grievous crime.*

*Now it so happens that in your kingdom
A Shudra is doing just that—
He is practising severe penance—
And this has caused the death of the child.*

*Adharma, in city or village,
Will corrupt the kingdom.
The king who fails to punish the culprit
Will deserve hell.
There is no doubt of this.
Find out, great king,
Who the culprit is;
Check misdeed and crime,
Let dharma be restored,
Let your subjects live long,
Let the child's life be returned."*

The nectar-sweet words of Narada pleased Rama and he said to Lakshmana:

"Dear brother, go to the palace gate and advise the Brahmin to embalm his child in oil and unguents and ensure that the corpse does not decompose."

Rama mentally summoned the aerial chariot Pushpaka and, leaving the kingdom in the care of Lakshmana and Bharata, he flew to the western territories and then to the northern region of the Himalayas.

He found no sign of misdeed there.

He flew over the eastern region and noted the purity and nobility of the people there, as brilliantly spotless as a mirror.

Then he searched the southern territories, near the Shaivala mountain, beside a large lake. Near the lake he saw a holy man hanging head downwards, engaged in strict self-mortification.

"I admire your *tapasya*," exclaimed Rama, "you who are firm in your vows! Tell me, formidable one, what is your caste? I, Rama, son of Dasharatha, am curious, and I wish to know.

What is your intention?

What is your goal?

Do you desire heaven,

*Or is it something else?
 Why all this tapasya?
 What fruits are you seeking
 That others find unobtainable?
 Tell me this frankly.
 May you prosper, holy one!
 Are you a Brahmin?
 An invincible Kshatriya?
 Or a third-caste Vaishya?
 Are you a Shudra?
 Tell me the truth."*

From his head-downward position, the *tapasya*-practiser replied to Rama of noble deeds:

*"Illustrious Rama,
 I was born in a Shudra womb.
 I am practising tapasya
 To become like a god
 Despite my physical body.
 I am not lying, Rama.
 When I say that I desire
 To achieve the world of the gods.
 I am a Shudra,
 My name is Shambuka."*

He had hardly finished speaking when Rama unsheathed his flashing sword and cut off Shambuka's head.

The killing of the Shudra made the gods and all the followers of Agni, the god of fire, shout: "*Sadhu! Sadhu! Excellent! Excellent!*"

Again and again they showered praise on Rama.

Fragrant divine flowers, scattered by the wind god Vayu, rained on all sides.

Supremely pleased, the gods addressed famed-in-truth Rama:

"Divine one! Noble-minded one! You have served the interests of the gods. Foe-destroying scion of the Raghu dynasty, you have made sure that this Shudra will never attain heaven."

Famed-in-truth Rama heard the words of the gods and, with palms folded in *anjali*, he said to thousand-eyed Indra, chief of the gods:

"If you are truly pleased with me, then restore the Brahmin's son to life. This is the only boon I ask. Grant me this, O gods. It was my fault that the boy died. Return his life to him! I promised his father I would give him back his son. May you prosper, O gods! Make true my promise."

Indra replied joyfully, adding to the happiness of Rama: "Rest assured, Rama: the boy is restored to life and reunited with his parents. He regained life the moment the Shudra's head fell on the ground. Go, Rama, and prosper!"

Illustrious Rama said these dharma-laden words to Lakshmana, "I have decided to perform the Horse Sacrifice. The horse shall be released by me after all the auspicious rituals and observances have been fulfilled, for which reason it is my desire that you summon Vasishtha, Vamadeva, Jabali, Kashyapa and other Brahmins for advice."

Lakshmana escorted the twice-born sages to Rama.

They saw Rama seated like a god on the throne, approached, and offered him puja.

Joining his palms in *pranjali*, Rama informed them of his decision; his words were filled with dharma.

All the details were arranged in consultation with the Brahmins. A black horse marked with all the auspicious signs was released by Rama.

Rama placed the horse in Lakshmana's charge, and, leading his army, marched ahead to the Naimisha forest, where he was honoured by the kings of different territories and his sovereignty acknowledged.

A magnificently decorated pavilion was erected, and the Horse Sacrifice commenced.

Such profusion of generosity was never witnessed before. Those who expected gold were given gold, those who desired gems received gems; silver, jewellery, and expensive clothes were distributed with unthinking munificence.

The Sacrifice continued for a whole year.

While the Horse Sacrifice was being performed, *bhagavan rishi* Valmiki's disciples came to witness the glorious ceremony.

Bullock-carts heaped with gifts of fruits, roots, and other provi-

sions were sent to Valmiki's beautiful retreat.

Valmiki said to his twin disciples Lava and Kusha:

*“Go, children,
And chant the Ramayana
Joyfully and accurately
In the retreats of rishis,
The homes of Brahmins,
The palaces of princes,
On roads and highways—
But specially chant it
Before Rama and the ritviks
In the pavilion erected
For the Horse Sacrifice.*

*Here are delicious hill fruits
That cancel fatigue.
Eat them and chant;
The juice of the fruits
Will sweeten your voices.
Should Rama invite you
To chant before the rishis,
Do so! On each occasion,
Chant twenty cantos,
And accept no payment!
What good is gold
To ascetics subsisting
On roots and fruits?
If Rama enquires,
‘Whose sons are you?’
Say, ‘Valmiki’s disciples.’
Chant freely and sweetly
To the accompaniment
Of stringed instruments.
Chant the Ramayana
From beginning to end,
And see that no displeasure
Irritates the king,
For according to dharma*

*A raja's the father of all.
Cheerfully, melodiously,
Tomorrow at dawn
Chant the epic poem
With musical accompaniment."*

Sita's twin sons replied, "We will do as you say."
They slept peacefully that night with the advice of *rishi* Valmiki in their hearts.

At dawn the twin ascetic brothers bathed and lit the sacred fire and began chanting the *Ramayana* as instructed by the *rishi*.

*A mellifluent poem,
The epic of Valmiki,
Varied in music,
Chanted to the strains
Of stringed instruments.
Rama listened, enchanted,
His curiosity stirred.*

*The twin brothers chanted
With dulcet voices,
Like Gandharvas singing,
And the audience listened
Enthralled by their artistry.
Each turned to his neighbour
Whispering, "How closely
They resemble Rama,
Like twin planets,
Except for matted hair
And tree-bark dress,
Where's the distinction
Between them and Rama?"*

Rama listened to the first twenty cantos, chanted by Lava and Kusha as directed by *rishi* Narada, and said to Lakshmana, "Give these noble-minded boys twenty thousand gold coins, expensive

clothes, and whatever else they desire."

Lakshmana offered the gold, but the mahatma brothers refused, saying, "What good is gold to ascetics like us who live on roots and fruits?"

Astonished, Rama enquired, "How many cantos are there in this epic? Which mahatma poet composed it? Where is that finest of ascetics?"

The twins replied, "*Bhagavan* Valmiki is the composer of the epic which narrates your life. He is our guru. The poem is in six books, and the Uttara-kanda is the Aftermath. If you so desire, we will chant it before you during the intervals of the Horse Sacrifice."

With an audience comprising ascetics, kings, and tree-folk, Rama listened for many days to the exquisite song.

Yes, they are Sita's sons, he thought, *Kusha and Lava*.

He pondered deeply. Summoning messengers of unimpeachable etiquette, he ordered them, in the midst of that gathering, "Go immediately to *bhagavan* Valmiki and tell him this: 'If she is indeed blameless, if her character is indeed pure, then let her come to me with your approval and prove her purity.' Bring me his and Sita's views on this matter. Tomorrow at dawn Sita, daughter of Janaka, is welcome to come and prove her purity in my presence."

Valmiki, shining ascetic, heard of Rama's wish, and said, "So be it. It will be done as Rama desires. Sita will follow Rama's wish, for a husband is a god to his wife."

That night passed. Next day a large gathering of rajas, rakshasas, tree-folk, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and strict-vowed Brahmins from all corners of the kingdom assembled out of curiosity in hundreds of thousands to witness the proving of Sita's purity.

They stood a motionless mass, as if petrified.

The excellent ascetic Valmiki arrived, with Sita following, her head bowed, her palms joined in *anjali*, tears in her eyes, Rama in her heart.

Seeing Sita following Valmiki, like Shruti following Brahma, the spectators shouted, "*Hala-hala!*"

There was a bewildering, sudden uproar.

Some shouted, "*Sadhu, Rama! Excellent, Rama!*"

Others shouted, "*Sadhu, Sita! Excellent, Sita!*"

Others praised both together.

Accompanied by Sita, the excellent ascetic Valmiki approached Rama and said:

*"Son of Dasharatha,
Here is strict-vowed Sita,
Dharma-charini lady
Morally impeccable,
The lady you abandoned
In front of my ashram
Because you feared
Your subjects' censure.
Command her, Rama—
She is here to prove
Her purity in public.
Her heroic twin sons
Are your sons, Rama.
This is the truth.
I never speak a lie:
They are your sons.
If Sita is tainted,
May all my tapasya
Be frustrated for ever!
I have always disciplined
My thought, word, and deed—
If Sita is tainted,
May all my discipline
Be frustrated for ever.
My five senses—and the sixth,
My mind—have provided
Me insight into Sita's
Perfect purity,
While I sat in the forest
In supreme meditation
Near a waterfall.
To you who recoil
From public shame,
She will publicly prove*

*The truth of her purity.
 Here is the lady
 Whom you repudiated,
 Though you loved her deeply
 And knew she was innocent.
 With celestial vision
 I have seen her as pure,
 And with human voice
 I proclaim her as such."*

Rama looked at lovely Sita standing with palms joined in *anjali* and said in front of the assembled multitude:

*"So be it then!
 I accept all you say.
 With the gods as witnesses,
 Sita assured me before
 Of her purity;
 I accepted her then;
 But the people murmured,
 And I sent her away.
 It was fear of the people
 That impelled me to do so.
 Forgive me, Brahmin.
 I hereby acknowledge
 Lava and Kusha
 As my own sons,
 And after she vindicates
 Her purity in public,
 I'll acknowledge Sita
 As the wife I love."*

The gods, led by Brahma, the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, Vishva-devas, Maruts, *maha-rishis*, Nagas, perfected mortals and other celestial beings arrived to witness the trial of chaste Sita.

Rama repeated:

*"I endorse the vision
 Of rishi Valmiki*

*That Sita is pure,
But only when proof
Of her purity is public,
Will I accept her
As the wife I love."*

Sita looked at the assembly. She was dressed in the ochre robe of ascetics. She bowed her head, she lowered her poignant eyes, she joined her palms in *anjali*.

Sita said:

*"Madhavi, goddess,
Devi of the earth,
I beg of you—
If I have never,
Even in thought,
Loved any but Rama,
Then accept me, goddess,
Take me in you, devi.
If I have in thought,
In word and in deed,
Only dwelt on Rama
And on Rama only,
Then, earth-goddess, accept me,
Take me in you, devi.
If it is true
That I know no man
But Rama, then, devi,
Accept me, take
Me in you, earth-goddess."*

Sita had hardly finished speaking when a celestial throne, borne on the heads of powerful begemmed nagas, appeared out of the earth.

The Earth Goddess stood before Sita.

She took Sita in her arms, welcomed her and gracefully placed her on the celestial throne.

Flowers rained from the sky in a ceaseless downpour.

Slowly, as the gods watched, the earth opened and Sita descen-

ded into the nether world of Rasatala.

The gods acclaimed her, "*Sadhu! Sadhu! Excellent! Excellent! All-suffering Sita, serenely-accepting Sita!*"

The assembled kings and ascetics watched with wonder-struck delight.

From the sky they watched, on earth they watched, they watched from the underworld of Patala, animate and inanimate creatures watched; they watched Sita enter the heart of the earth.

They watched, horripilating.

At that moment, the whole earth shuddered.

After Sita had disappeared from sight, Rama picked up a staff used in the Horse Sacrifice and, leaning on it, he succumbed to grief. Tears welled up in his eyes; pain wracked his body; anger vexed his mind; he bowed his head.

*"O Earth," he cried,
 "Return me my Sita!
 Or I will punish you!
 Surely you know me,
 For Sita's your daughter,
 I your son-in-law!
 Return Sita to me,
 Or open your arms
 And take me too
 To be with Sita!
 Return Sita to me!
 Or I will destroy you—
 Crush your mountains,
 Burn your forests,
 Pulverise everything
 Into useless liquid!"*

Brahma, in the presence of the gods, said to raving and tortured Rama:

*"Rama, Rama,
 Disciplined hero,*

*Scourge of your foes,
 Recall who you are,
 Remember your nature!
 Strong-armed hero,
 Must I remind you
 Of your divinity?
 Must I remind you
 That you are Vishnu?
 Immaculate Sita
 Has happily reached
 The world of the nagas
 By the strength of tapasya.
 She will be with you
 In heaven.*

Rama, listen:

*This is the epic
 Surpassingly sweet
 That tells the story
 Of Rama's adventures
 To the rest of the world.
 Never doubt that.
 This is the poem
 Composed by Valmiki
 Where all is narrated
 From the time of your birth
 To a glimpse of the future,
 Your sorrows and joys,
 In the smallest detail.
 The Adi-kavi,
 Valmiki, first among poets,
 Has devoted the poem
 To your praise and honour.
 With the gods I heard
 The whole Ramayana,
 A compassionate poem,
 Celestial, truthful,
 Exquisitely beautiful,
 Inspired by dharma.
 Listen to the conclusion*

*Of the epic Ramayana.
It is called 'Uttara',
The 'Aftermath'; surely
No one should hear it
First except you,
For you are doubtless
The greatest of rishis."*

Brahma, Creator of the three worlds, said this and disappeared.

Rama returned with Lava and Kusha to the leaf-thatched hut of Valmiki, where he passed the night grieving for Sita.

Next morning Rama summoned the great ascetics and asked his sons, "Chant me the epic."

Lava and Kusha sat in the midst of the mahatma *maha-rishis* and chanted the Uttara-kanda of the *Ramayana*.

Without Sita, the earth was as barren as a desert to Rama.

He distributed wealth to the kings, cave-dwellers, tree-folk, rakshasas and important Brahmins, and returned to Ayodhya.

He did not marry again. Instead, he ordered a golden statue of Sita sculpted, which occupied the wife's place at every religious ritual he performed.

He ruled long and in accordance with dharma. Rains were timely, crops abundant, skies bright and clear, the kingdom prosperous during his reign. There were no diseases, no beggars, no one died prematurely.

Many years passed.

Rama's mother Kaushalya, old and revered by her sons and grandsons, died.

Then Sumitra died; and later Kaikeyi, after performing many acts of dharma. They went to heaven, where they were joyfully re-united with Raja Dasharatha. In heaven they received all the fruits of their deeds of dharma.

A long time passed. One day Kala, the Spirit of Time, disguised as a begging ascetic, appeared at the gate of dharma-following Rama and said to Lakshmana who was stationed there, "I have come on

an important mission. I desire audience with Rama.” ’

Lakshmana hurried inside.

“A messenger who dazzles like the sun as a result of his *tapasya* wishes to see you on urgent work.”

“Dear brother,” said Rama, “send in this messenger who is here on such important business from his master.”

Flaming with ascetic glory, the begging ascetic said, “May you always prosper!”

The ascetic sat on a golden seat.

Rama asked, “Revered one, what message do you bring for me?”

The ascetic replied, “If you honour the wishes of the gods, it is essential that our meeting be private. Any eavesdropper or interrupter must be instantly sentenced to death. The words of the Chief of Ascetics cannot be divulged in public.”

“So be it!” said Rama, and instructed Lakshmana, “Dismiss the door-keeper, brave brother, and guard the entrance. This meeting is private, and I will order anyone who interrupts put to death.”

“Now, noble ascetic,” said Rama, “speak to me freely and fearlessly. I will cherish every word you speak.”

“Listen, raja,” said Death, disguised as an ascetic. “I have been sent by Brahma, Grandsire of the worlds.

*In a previous birth
I was his son.
I am born of maya,
I am all-destroying Kala,
The Spirit of Time.
Bhagavan Brahma,
Lord of the worlds, says,
‘Your mission is done,
You have redeemed the worlds.
In the distant past,
You lay in cosmic rest
On the ocean of time
And gave me birth
With the help of maya.
I was born of the sun-
Dazzling lotus
That sprang from your navel;*

*You gave me the task
 Of creating the worlds.
 O Lord of the world,
 I depend on you
 For you are my strength,
 The source of my being.
 Since you are Vishnu,
 All-pervading Protector,
 Eternal, invincible,
 O Vishnu, be gracious
 And protect all creation!
 When Ravana oppressed
 The beings of the world,
 You became their saviour.
 For eleven thousand years
 You resolved to remain
 On earth before returning
 To the realm of the gods.
 O Mind-Born Vishnu,
 Your hour has come,
 Your stay among mortals
 Is over, it is time
 To return to us.
 But if it so pleases
 You, remain with mortals,
 Maharaja, and prosper!
 Or, if you wish,
 Return to the gods
 And irradiate heaven
 With the presence of Vishnu.'
 These are Brahma's words."*

Rama listened to the words of Kala. Smiling, he replied to the All-Destroyer:

*"You have honoured me
 By coming here,
 I am honoured also
 By the inspiring message*

*Of the God of gods.
 I took birth on earth
 For the worlds' welfare.
 Bhadram te'astu!
 May you prosper, Kala!
 I had you in my mind,
 Which is why you came.
 What Brahma Pitamaha
 Says is true, All-Destroyer:
 Whatever I do
 Must always be done
 With the gods in mind."*

While the two were talking, the *bhagavan rishi* Durvasa arrived at the palace gate and said to Lakshmana, "I am here on urgent business. I desire immediate audience with Rama."

"He is busy and cannot be interrupted," replied Lakshmana. "Excellent *rishi*, what matter can be so urgent? Please have patience."

Rishi Durvasa lost his temper and looked at Lakshmana with fiery eyes; he said: "Announce my arrival this instant! Or face my curse, which I will cast on you, on the kingdom, on Ayodhya, on Rama, Bharata, and the whole Ikshvaku race! I am trying to restrain myself, Lakshmana, but my discipline is running out."

Lakshmana reflected on the implications of the ascetic's pronouncement, and thought: *Better that I singly suffer than that everyone be ruined.*

He went inside and informed Rama, interrupting the conversation with Kala.

Rama took leave of Kala and hurried to meet Durvasa.

He stood before ascetically-refulgent Durvasa with palms joined in *anjali* and asked, "What can I do that will please you?"

Durvasa said, "Listen to me, dharma-following Rama. I have today completed a thousand-year fast. What have you to give me that I can eat?"

Rama happily offered the *rishi* food that tasted like *amrita*, the nectar of heaven.

"*Sadhu*, Rama!" exclaimed Durvasa. "Excellent!"

Saying this, he returned to his ashram.

Rama recalled the message of Kala and, with pain in his heart, he stood with bowed head, speechless.

He was lost in thought. He said to himself again and again, *Nothing will remain, nothing will remain.*

Then he lapsed into silence.

Seeing Rama with bowed head, like a moon in eclipse, as if deeply troubled, Lakshmana said cheerfully, "I am responsible for your sorrow, strong-armed hero. But this is all the result of past karma. Such is Kala, such is Time. Kill me without compunction! Keep your promise! Order my death. Those who break their promise go to hell. If you have any feeling for me, and if you wish to abide by dharma, then kill me, maharaja!"

Rama, in anguish, summoned his ministers and priests.

He told them of Durvasa's arrival, and the promise he had made to disguised Kala that he would order the execution of any interrupter of their meeting.

They were silent.

Then Vasishtha spoke, "I foresaw, by the strength of my asceticism the disaster whose very thought causes you to horripilate. Kala is all-powerful. Banish Lakshmana. If word given is not kept, dharma is degraded. When dharma is corrupted, all animate and inanimate creatures, the gods and *rishis* of the three worlds also perish. This is certain. To save the three worlds, banish Lakshmana."

Rama listened to these words filled with dharma and practical wisdom, and announced in the presence of the assembly:

*"To honour dharma,
To see that dharma
Does not decline,
I banish you, Lakshmana.
To a man of honour
There is no difference
Between death and banishment."*

Lakshmana went to the Sarayu river, and absorbed himself in

breath-controlling yoga.

Apsaras and *rishis* rained flowers on him, and he was taken to heaven in the chariot of Indra.

In the meantime Rama, suffering intensely, said to his ministers, Brahmins, and citizens:

"I will today appoint dharma-devoted Bharata Lord of Ayodhya. Then I will retire to the forest. Start preparations without delay. I will follow the path of Lakshmana."

Rama gave the southern Kosala to Kusha and the northern to Lava. He embraced his twin sons, installed them kings in Ayodhya, and presented them with gold and jewellery, thousands of chariots and ten thousand horses, and countless elephants. Then he sent them to their respective capitals in their kingdoms.

Gods, *rishis* and Gandharvas came to Rama, saying, "We will follow you. Do not leave us helpless."

Rama said to Vibhishana, "Lord of rakshasas, stay in Lanka. So long as the sun and moon shine, so long as I am remembered on earth, so long will your kingdom endure. Rule with dharma as your guide."

"It will be done," replied Vibhishana.

Rama said to Hanuman, "Live long, noble Hanuman. So long as my story is told, listen to its truth and be happy."

To Jambavan he said the same, adding, "Live on earth till the Kali Yuga begins."

Then, to the other cave-dwellers and tree-folk he said, "If you so wish, follow me."

All in Ayodhya followed Rama, with love and devotion. Not one living creature could be seen in Ayodhya; even the animals followed him to the forest.

Rama came to the sacred waters of the Sarayu.

Brahma, Grandsire of the worlds, appeared in his aerial chariot. The sky was lit with a transcendental radiance. Soft and sweet breezes blew. *Apsaras* and Gandharvas sang.

Rama entered the waters, and Brahma from the sky said:

*"Gracious Vishnu, enter
The Eternal Abode!
Support of the world,
Enter your own realm.*

*Ineffable one,
Indestructible, Undecaying,
Assume your true nature!
Be reunited with Maya,
Your large-eyed consort!"*

With his brothers, Rama entered the Abode of Vishnu in his Vishnu-Form.

And the beings of heaven exulted, saying "Sadhu! Sadhu! Excellent! Excellent!"

This is the epic *Ramayana* with its Aftermath, the composition of Valmiki. It is respected by Brahma himself.

*This epic destroys sin,
It grants long life,
It equals the Vedas,
It should be recited
Only to believers.
A single shloka's recitation
Wipes out all the sins
Committed in a day.
Read it with faith.
It will grant Dharma,
Artha, Kama and Moks'.a
May Vishnu bless you.
May his strength inspire you.
Bhadram-astu:
May you prosper.*

Glossary

ABHIJIT: is the twenty-second *nakṣatra* in the Hindu calendar. The Hindu year begins with the new moon of Chaitra and takes its name from the fourteenth *nakṣatra* called Chitrā. The following table provides relevant information on the *nakṣatras* (or lunar asterisms):

<i>Solar Month</i>	<i>Equivalent Zodiacal House</i>	<i>Lunar Month</i>	<i>Equivalent Western Month</i>	<i>Nakṣatra or Lunar Asterism</i>
1. Meṣha (Ram)	Aries	Chaitra	Mar-Apr	14th Chitrā 15th Svāti
2. Vṛṣhabha (Bull)	Taurus	Vaiśākha	Apr-May	16th Vaiśākha 17th Anurādhā
3. Mithuna (Twins)	Gemini	Jyeshtha	May-June	18th Jyeshtha 19th Mūla
4. Karka (Crab)	Cancer	Āshādhā	June-July	20th Pūrva Āshādhā 21st Uttara Āshādhā Abhijit, "Balance"
5. Simha (Lion)	Leo	Śrāvana	Jul-Aug	Abhijit 22nd Śravanā 23rd Dhaniṣṭhā
6. Kanyā (Virgin)	Virgo	Bhādrapada	Aug-Sept	24th Śatatārakā 25th Pūrvabhādrapadā 26th Uttarabhādrapadā
7. Tula (Balance)	Libra	Āshvina	Sept-Oct	27th Revatī 1st Āshvinī 2nd Bharani
8. Vṛiśchika (Scorpion)	Scorpio	Kārttika	Oct-Nov	3rd Kṛittikā 4th Rohini
9. Dhanu (Bow)	Sagittarius	Mārgaśirsha	Nov-Dec	5th Mṛigaśhīras 6th Ārdra
10. Makara (Sea monster)	Capricorn	Pauṣha	Dec-Jan	7th Punarvasu 8th Puṣhyā
11. Kumbha (Pitcher)	Aquarius	Māgha	Jan-Feb	9th Āshleṣhā 10th Maghā
12. Mīna (Fish)	Pisces	Phālguna	Feb-Mar	11th Pūrva Phalgunī 12th Uttara Phalgunī 13th Hasta

ĀCHĀRYA: is one of a large number of persons respected in Hinduism as expounders and practisers of dharma. Among these are: guru, mahant (head of a monastery), mahatma, muni (one who has taken a vow of *mauna* or silence), purohita (royal, priest, but now any family priest), paṇḍit (any person learned in the law, philosophy and ethics of Hinduism), ṛishi (holy

visionary), *sādhu* (a renouncer of the world, an ascetic), *sannyāsi* (a person who has entered the last stage of human life, usually a mendicant), *svāmi* (*swāmi*, spiritual teacher), *yogi* (a follower of yoga, any holy man or muni).

ADHARMA: (a+dharma) literally anti-dharma; loosely, it stands for un-righteousness, vice and evil. See *Dharma*.

ADITI: mother of the seven *Ādityas*; eight sons were born to her but she abandoned the eighth, *Mārtāṇḍa*, the sun. Originally she was a Rig-vedic goddess symbolizing infinite space. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* she is the daughter of *Dakṣha*, the wife of *Kaśhyapa*, and the mother of *Viṣṇu*. In some texts she is the wife of *Viṣṇu*.

ĀDI-KAVI: (primal-poet) the title given to *Vālmiki* to honour his composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the first epic.

ĀDITYAS: see *Aditi*. The *Ādityas* are gods headed by *Varuna*. They were originally seven and they signified infinite space and power. Later they were increased to eight and still later to twelve symbolizing the different signs of the zodiac. Their names change but the following are generally included: *Indra*, *Viṣṇu*, *Varuna*, *Mitra*, *Rudra*, *Pūṣan*, and *Tvaṣṭri*.

AGASTYA: is a *mahā-rishi* who was born from the sperm spilled by *Varuna* and *Mitra* when they saw the *apsarā* *Urvaśhī*. The sperm was put inside a pot from which emerged *Agastya*, miniscule in size. In fact he is classed as dark-complexioned, short-statured and un-*Āryan*. His progeny are sometimes classified among the *rākṣhasas* (q.v.). *Agastya* is an honoured and revered figure in South India and is supposed to have been the founder of Tamil grammar. After educating the *Drāviḍians* he secluded himself on *Podiyil* hill and spent the rest of his life composing treatises on black magic, astrology and medicine. According to one legend he saw in a vision his ancestors dangling head down in an abyss. To redeem them he had to beget a son. So he took the eyes of a deer, the pliability of the palm tree, the fragrance of the champak, the delicacy of the down on a swan's neck, and he created *Lopāmudrā* because her form (*mudrā*) was fashioned out of the loss (*lopa*) suffered by the plants and animals. He had her accepted as a daughter in the king of *Vidarbha*'s palace; later he married her in spite of the king's initial reluctance.

AGNI: is the fire deity revered in the Vedas, the sacred witness of the most important rituals of Hinduism at birth, marriage and death. His image is golden and in his four arms he wields an axe, a torch, a fan, and a spoon; occasionally some images show him with a rosary and a fiery spear. He dresses in black and rides a ram; red horses pull his chariot which has the seven winds as its wheels. With his seven tongues he licks the ghee offered during the ritual oblations. *Agni* is the principle of inner illumination as well as of outer radiance.

AHALYĀ: wife of the *rishi* *Gautama* who was punished by her husband for agreeing to the sexual liaison with *Indra*. *Indra* was cursed with having his body covered with a thousand *yonis* which were later transformed into eyes (hence *Indra*'s title "Thousand-Eyed"). In another legend *Gautama* ordered his son *Chirakāri* to kill *Ahalyā*. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* she is revived

by Rāma after Gautama had cursed her to become an unattractive stone slab for the rest of her life.

AIRĀVATA: (literally "moisture-possessing") is the four-tusked elephant who emerged from the primeval churning of the ocean by the gods and the anti-gods. According to another legend he was born from the eggshell from the right hand of Brahmā. He and his mate Abhramū guard the eastern quarter.

AJA: Raghu was the king of the Solar dynasty, and his son Aja was chosen by princess Indumatī for her husband in the *svayamvara*. She died soon after; her son is Daśharatha, father of Rāma.

AJAMUKHI: rākṣhasī in the court of Rāvaṇa.

AKAMPANA: is the *rākṣasa* general who persuades Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā. He is killed by Hanumān.

ĀKĀŚHA-SPACE: In Hindu cosmology "there are five senses of perception and five forces of action corresponding to the five elements (ether [ākāśha], air, fire, water, and earth), which are but the spheres of action of the senses. The senses of perception have as their organs 'ear, skin, eye, tongue, and the fifth, the nostril,' while the corresponding forces of action have as organs 'voice, hands, feet, genitals, and anus'." (Alain Daniélou). It is almost impossible to find an English equivalent for ākāśha, and translators render it as either ether or space. Strictly speaking, it is neither.

AKOPA: a minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.

AKŚHA: the eldest son of Rāvaṇa; he is killed by Hanumān.

AMṚITA: (*a + mṛita* = non-dying, immortal) the juice of eternal life supposed to have been produced when the gods and the anti-gods churned the waters of the primeval ocean with the mountain Mandara as the churning rod. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and many of the *Purāṇas* (specially the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*) describe the incident with variations. The basic myth narrates how the irascible sage Durvāsas cursed the gods who therefore sought the help of Brahmā. Viṣṇu advised Brahmā to instruct the gods to churn the ocean of milk and assumed his Kūrma avatāra form on which the gods placed Mandara and used the giant snake Vāsuki as the churning rope. At first there appeared poison which Śhiva swallowed in order to save the world. Thereafter emerged the fourteen jewels (*chaturdaśa-ratnam*): 1) Chandra the moon; 2) Pārijāta, the marvellous tree which Indra removed and planted in his heavenly garden called Nandana; 3) Airāvata, the four-tusked elephant which also Indra appropriated; 4) Kāmadhenu, the cow of prosperity and abundance; 5) Madā, the goddess of wine whom Varuṇa took as his wife and renamed Vārūṇī; 6) Kalpavṛkṣha, the wish-fulfilling tree; 7) Rambhā, the most exquisite of the apsarās in Indra's heaven; 8) Uchchhaiṣhravas, a marvellous white horse taken away by Indra; 9) Lakṣhmī, goddess of prosperity and beauty who became Viṣṇu's consort; 10) Śhaṅkha, the conch shell of victory which is held by Viṣṇu; 11) Gadā, the mace of sovereign power, and Dhanus, a magic bow, both taken by Viṣṇu; 12) Ratna, gems and jewels of all kinds; 13) Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods who carries in his hands the most remarkable churned product which is 14) Amṛita in a golden bowl. Amṛita is also called

nirjara (not-aging) and piyūṣha (juice).

ANDHAKA: an anti-god, the son of Kaśhyapa and Diti; he had a thousand arms and heads and two thousand eyes and feet. His name is Andhaka or the blind one because in spite of his innumerable eyes he walked unsteadily like a blind man. Śhiva killed him when he tried to steal the Pārijāta (see Amṛita) tree from heaven.

ĀNGA: is the territory which is roughly now the area known as Bengal. Its capital was Champā.

ĀNGADA: the son of Vālī, heir-apparent to the kingdom of Kiṣhkindha. He joined Rāma and Lakṣhmana and fought against Rāvaṇa.

ĀNGIRAS: a ṛiṣhi mentioned in the Vedas—one of the seven mahā-ṛiṣhis and one of the ten Prajāpatīs or creators of mankind. The name is possibly derived from *agni* and he is sometimes mentioned as born to Agni's daughter Āgneyī. His wives are Smṛiti (Memory), Shraddhā (Faith), Svadhā (Obolations) and Sati (Truth).

ĀṆJALI: the traditional Hindu *mudrā* of respect and salutation. In this gesture both hollowed palms are pressed together and raised under the chin or to the forehead as a greeting or for supplication.

ANJANA: an *apsarā* who became the wife of a *vānara* (tree-man) named Kesari. Her son Hanumān was born by her relationship with the wind god Vāyu.

APSARĀ: (*ap* + *sara* = water-flow) is a nymph in Svarga or Indra's heaven. *Apsarās* are the common property of the dwellers of heaven and are sometimes despatched by gods to seduce mortals from holy pursuits. The important *apsarās* are Rambhā (see Amṛita) who was ravished by Rāvaṇa; Tilotamā who was responsible for destroying the anti-gods Śhumbha and his brother; Ghṛitāchī who through Viśhvakarman became mother of many mixed castes; Urvaśhī who tempted the gods Mitra and Varuna, and married Purūravas; Menakā who became the mother of Śhakuntalā through Viśhvāmitra; and Pramlochā who seduced the ṛiṣhi Kanḍu.

ARANYA: a forest, wilderness.

ARGHYA: an offering to gods or humans worthy of reverence, consisting of rice, *durva*-grass, flowers, along with water to wash the feet in the case of a newly arrived guest. Sometimes only water is offered in a small boat-shaped receptacle.

ARIES: the first of the twelve signs of the zodiac. The Hindu equivalent is the Meṣha or the Ram.

ARJUNA: also known as the Arjunaka. This is the tall evergreen tree, a variety of *neem* called the Terminalia Arjuna which has small flowers clustering at the end of its branches.

ARTHA: literally, object, wealth property, utility, meaning, purpose; therefore, material prosperity or success; the first of the four ends of life recommended in Hindu ethics, the other three being Dharma, Kāma, and Mokṣha.

ARTHAVIT: A minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.

ARUṆA: is the dawn and sometimes personified as the charioteer of the sun.

- He is the son of Kaśhyapa and Kadru, and therefore the brother of Garuḍa the bird-deity.
- AŚHOKA:** is the *Saraca Indica* or the *Jonesia*, a tree of average size with lovely small red flowers. It blossoms in January and February. The birth of the Buddha took place under an Aśhoka tree. Its bark is bitter and is given as medication for indigestion, "ulcers, haemorrhages, and vaginal disorders."
- AŚHVAKARṆA:** this is the *Śāl* tree which grows profusely in Central and Eastern India. It abounds in white and pink flowers. It is called "horse-eared" because of the shape of the leaves.
- AŚHRAM:** is an abode of ascetics, *sādhus* and *ṛishis*; literally, a place of refuge.
- AŚHVAPATI:** is the prince of Kaikeya; he is Bharata's maternal uncle, brother of Kaikeyī; his other name is Yudhajita.
- AŚHVINS:** are the twin horse-headed gods of agriculture. They are also the physicians of the gods. In the "caste" system of heaven, the *Ādityas* and *Mitra-Varuṇa* are *Brāhmīns*, the *Maruts* are *Kṣhatṛiyas*, and the *Aśhvīns* are *Vaiśhyas*. They are the sons of the sky and their golden chariot is pulled by birds. According to one legend they are the sons of *Sanjñā* (Understanding). Their common wife is *Sūryā*, daughter of the Sun. They are often propitiated during wedding ceremonies.
- ASTA:** literally, the west.
- ATIBALA:** *Bala* and *Atibala* (Power and Super-Power) are a system of sacred mantras taught by the *ṛishi Viśhvāmītra* to *Rāma* and *Lakṣhmana* in their youth, they include the art of warfare.
- ĀTMAN:** literally, breath; akin to Old High German *ātum*, meaning breath. "In Hinduism, the innermost essence of each individual; often the supreme universal self" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- AVATĀRA:** Literally, "descent". An incarnation of a god. *Viśhṇu*, the Preserving Aspect of the Hindu trinity (*Brahmā-Viśhṇu-Śhiva*) has had nine *avatāras* so far, and the order of their appearance suggests an evolutionary development: *Matsya* (Fish), *Kūrma* (Tortoise), *Varāha* (Boar), *Narasimha* (Man-Lion), *Vāmana* (Dwarf), *Paraśu-Rāma* (Axe-Armed Rāma), *Rāma*, *Kṛishṇa*, Buddha. The tenth, *Kalki*, the White Horse, is predicted to appear at the end of the present *Kali-Yuga*. See *Viśhṇu*.
- ĀYODHYĀ:** the capital of *Kosala*, which was the kingdom of *Dāśharatha*. Very likely the modern *Oudh*, it is one of the seven sacred cities of Hinduism.
- ĀYOMUKHĪ:** a *rākṣhasī* entrusted to guard *Sītā* in *Rāvana's* palace.
- BALA:** see *Atibala*.
- BĀLAKĀṆDA:** literally, the Boyhood Book; the first book of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*.
- BHADRA:** a courtier of *Rāma*.
- BHADRAKĀLĪ:** 1) literally, the gracious goddess of Time. One of the appel-

lations of Kālī, the consort of Śhiva. Her fierce aspect becomes auspicious and benevolent when her devotee sees the symbolic truth of Time as the all-consuming power of the universe; 2) a species of plant also known as *gandhotī* used for cremation purposes.

BHAGAVĀN: literally, possessing good fortune; the Blessed One; a title usually applied to the Deity as Creator.

BHAKTI: "religious devotion; love directed towards a personal deity" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

BHARADVĀJA: son of Bṛhaspati and father of Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. He welcomes Rāma and Sitā at his ashram at Prayāga (Allāhābād). His name literally means "child of two fathers"; in the *Mahābhārata* the story is that his mother was the wife of Utathya; she became pregnant by her husband and Bṛhaspati, and Dīrghatamas, the son in her womb by her husband, pushed out his half-brother Bharadvāja (so named by Bṛhaspati).

BHIKKṢHU: "a Hindu or Buddhist monk or religious mendicant" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary); literally, one who begs.

BHRIGU: is the great ṛishi, progenitor of the Bhārgava race in which Jama-dagni and Paraśhurāma were born.

BHŪTĪ: is the mother of the apsarā Manu who is mentioned only in the *Rāmāyana*.

BILVA: is the wood-apple, the Aegle Marmelos, popularly known as *Bel*. Its unripe fruit has medicinal value and its leaves are sacred to Śhiva.

BIMBA: is a plant, the Monordia Moradelpa, which has a red gourd for fruit.

BRAHMĀ: the Hindu Creator, also called Prajāpati. He is red-complexioned and four-headed. He had five heads but the fifth was consumed by Śhiva for an alleged insult. In his four hands he holds a sceptre or a spoon, or a rosary, or his bow Parivīta, or a water pot, and the Vedas. He rides a *hamsa* (a cross between a swan and a goose) and his śhakti is Sarasvatī the goddess of learning. One of his appellations is Ādi-Kavi, the first poet, which is also the title of Vālmiki.

BRAHMA-ṚISHIS: are Brāhmin ṛishis who live in Brahmā's heaven.

BRAHMACHĀRI: a celibate; one who practices sexual self-discipline in order to achieve a specific spiritual end.

BRAHMACHARYA: is the first of the four Hindu stages of life: 1) *brahmacharya*, a period of adolescence usually lasting twelve years though a student could carry on for another thirty-two years; 2) *grihasthya*, the householder stage, when married duties are performed along with other social *saṁskāras*; 3) *vānaprastha*, or "forest-departure", when the householder prepares himself for renunciation of the world. This decision is made on reaching the age of fifty or when sexual powers have declined or the skin has wrinkled or the hair has turned grey or when he sees the birth of the son of his son; 4) *sannyāsa*, is the stage of total renunciation when ritual duties and obligations are totally abandoned and even food is obtained by begging, the aim being to achieve philosophical serenity by union with Brahman.

BRĀHMINS: the priestly caste of Hinduism, though all Brāhmins are not priests. Brāhmins are categorised in two groups of five great families – the fair-skinned and dark-skinned. The fair-skinned are Pañcha-gauḍa and the dark-skinned are Pañcha-drāviḍa. The Pañcha-gauḍa are 1) Kanyā-Kubja of Kanauj; 2) Sārasvata, regarded as the purest, belonging to north-west of the river Sarasvatī; 3) Gauḍa of Bengal and Delhi; 4) Mithila of north Bihar and 5) Utkala of Orissa. The Pañch-drāviḍa are 1) Mahārāṣṭra, of Gujarāt known as the Chitpāvan Brāhmins; 2) Teliṅga of Andhra; 3) Drāviḍa of Tamil Nadu; 4) Karnāṭa of Karnāṭaka and 5) Mālābār of Kerala. Though claiming to be of pure Aryan stock most Brāhmins are actually of racial admixture.

BRĪHASPATI: literally, lord of prayer; he is supposed to be the guru of the gods. Because of his sexual misdeed with Mamatā, the wife of Utathya (see Bharadvāja), his own wife Tārā was abducted by Soma the moon.

CHAITRA: see Abhijit.

CHAITRARATHA: the king of the gandharvas who are the celestial musicians in Indra's heaven.

CHAKRA: Kṛṣṇa's miraculous discus which when flung decapitated the enemy and returned to the thrower. It is a flat sharp-edged circular weapon with spokes ranging from four to thirty-two. It is also called Sudarṣhana, "lovely-looking".

CHAKRAVĀKA: is a species of goose famed in legend for its marital fidelity. Separated from its mate at night, the bird calls out wailfully to express its intense anguish. Poets usually describe the chakravāka couple calling out to each other from the opposite banks of a river.

CHAMPAK: "an East Indian tree (*Michelia champaca*) the yellow flowers of which yield an oil used as a perfume." It is tall fast-growing evergreen tree and the flowers are used for medicinal purposes to cure ophthalmia and gout.

CHANDRA: the moon; also known as Soma; according to one legend he is the son of Dharma.

CHĀRAṆA: bard of the gods; panegyrist in Indra's heaven. The *chārana* tradition continues in Gujarāt and Rājasthān (where they are called *bhāts*) and Bengal (Bauls).

CHITRAKŪṬA: literally, "shining peak"; the site of Vālmiki's āśhram; its modern name is Chitrakoṭe, fifty miles south-east of Banda in Bundelkhand.

CHOWRI: "a whisk to keep off flies that is used in the East especially as a sign of rank" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

DAITYA: descendant of Diti by Kaśhyapa; a class of anti-gods who ally with the Dānavas in fighting against the gods.

DAKṢHA: mind-born son of Brahmā; chief of the Prajāpatis. In one legend he is said to be born of Aditi (q. v.).

- DANŚHTRA:** a rākshasa in the court of Rāvaṇa.
- DĀNAVA:** see Daitya.
- DANḌAKA:** a large forest between the Godāvarī and Narmadā rivers.
- DANTAVAKTRA:** a courtier in the palace of Rāma.
- DARBHA:** a species of grass used in Hindu religious rituals, specially yajñas; the *poa cynosuroides*; it is also called *kuśha* grass; it has long needle-pointed leaves, and is supposed to have been produced at the churning of the milk ocean.
- DARŚHAN:** “a blessing held by various Hindus to consist in the viewing of an eminent person (as a religious leader)” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary).
- DAŚHARATHA:** literally, “ten-charioted”; father of Rāma; rājā of Ayodhyā; son of Aja of the Ikṣhvāku dynasty.
- DEODAR:** “An East Indian cedar (*Cedrus desdara*) highly valued for its size and appearance as well as for its timber” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary); literally, “god-wood”.
- DEVAVRATA:** one of the ancestors of Janaka.
- DEVĪ:** literally, “goddess”; “used in India as a title following the personal name of a married woman” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary).
- DHANYAMĀLINĪ:** mother of Atikaya (literally, “huge-bodied”) a rākshasa warrior.
- DHARMA:** all attempts to define or explain dharma must remain tentative and nebulous. Cosmic dharma—the power that holds the universe together—is *rita*; but dharma can also be personal, social, and political. Unless the context is given, dharma remains elusive. Stability, justice, goodness, selflessness and duty are all aspects of dharma (literally, “that which is stable”). Curiously, Adharma (anti-dharma) is the son of Brahmā, who is the source of all dharma. To translate dharma as “religion” is to seriously limit the range of its meaning.
- DHARMA-CHĀRINĪ,** applied to a Hindu wife, this term means “one who follows the path of dharma”.
- DHARMAPĀLA:** a minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.
- DHARMĀTMĀ,** any holy person (*ātmīya*) who pursues dharma; hence, a title of respect for a man who excels in moral virtues.
- DHARĀ:** wife of the *ṛishi* Kaśhyapa.
- DHAVA:** a summer season plant with red flowers, the *Grislea tomentosa*.
- DHṚIṢṬĪ:** an adviser in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.
- DHŪMRĀKṢHA:** a rākshasa general in Rāvaṇa’s army.
- DAVAJAGRĪVA:** a rākshasa warrior in Rāvaṇa’s court.
- DRAUMAKULYA:** a holy area situated north of Sagara where Rāma experimentally shoots his arrows.
- DRONA:** a mountain.
- DUNḌHUBI:** a monster killed by Vāli.
- DURMUKHA:** a rākshasa adviser to Rāvaṇa.
- DURMUKHĪ:** a rākshasī entrusted by Rāvaṇa to guard Sitā.
- DUŚHANA:** a leader in the army of Khara; he was killed by Rāma.

DURVĀSAS: a *ṛishi* notorious for his uncontrollable temper. Literally, "ill clothed."

DVIVIDA: a *vānara* ally of Rāma.

GĀDHI: father of the *ṛishi* Viśhvāmītra. According to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, he was Indra himself who became Rājā Gādhi of the Kuśhika race.

GANDHAMĀDANA: literally, "Maddeningly fragrant". 1) A mountain in the centre of the world, where the gods dwell; 2) A *vānara* ally of Rāma; he was killed by Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit and resuscitated by herbs from Kailāsa.

GANDHARVAS: singers and dancers who drink soma and sport with apsarās; their king is Chitraratha. They live in Visāmpāna, a sky-city, and exercise special influence over women.

GĀNDHARVA-ARROW: a magically-powered missile supposedly granted by the gandharvas to their favourites.

GANGĀ: India's sacred river, received by Śhiva in his matted locks to prevent the rushing waters of heaven from flooding the earth. Also known as Gāndinī (Always-singing), Maṇḍākinī (Sweetly-flowing), Tripathagā (Triple-flowing, because it flows through Heaven, Earth and the lower regions).

GARUḌA: the legendary king of birds with the body of a man and the head, beak and talons of an eagle, white-faced and red-winged. He is the son of *ṛishi* Kaśhyapa and Vinatā, born from a huge egg five hundred years after his mother laid the egg. Garuḍa's eldest son by Śhyenī (Falcon) is Jatāyu, king of vultures who witnesses Sītā's abduction by Rāvaṇa and is killed while trying to save Sītā. Jatāyu's brother is Sampāti who is Garuḍa's son by Unnatī. He tried to fly up to the sun, burnt his wings in the process and plummeted on a mountain. When he informed Hanumān where Rāvaṇa had taken Sītā his wings healed immediately.

GAUTAMA: husband of Ahalyā; he curses Indra for seducing his wife. (See Ahalyā).

GAVAṢHKA: a *vānara* leader.

GAYA: 1) a rājā who surrenders to Rāvaṇa. 2) a *vānara* leader.

GHEE: "a semi-fluid clarified butter made in India and neighbouring countries usually from buffalo's milk" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

GHRITACHĪ: see Apsarā.

GODĀVARĪ: a river near Daṇḍakāraṇya forest. Also called Godā (cow-giver) because the *ṛishi* Gautama used its water to revive a dead cow. Its waters are supposed to cure leprosy.

GOMATĪ: one of the main tributaries of the Gaṅgā; also known as Gumtī.

GUHA: rājā of the Niśhada, a hill tribe; he assists Rāma during the period of exile.

HAI: a Sanskrit exclamation indicating despair, grief, regret and surprise.

HALA-HALA: an expression expressing confusion and commotion.

HANUMĀN: son of the wind god who is variously named Pavana, Vāyu or Marut; his mother is the *apsarā* Anjanā who was the wife of the *vānara* Kesari. His celibacy is supposed to give him extraordinary bhakti and physical strength. He can fly and change shape at will. Rāma gives him the gift of eternal youth and longevity.

HARIJATĀ: a *rākṣhasī* who guards Sītā in Rāvaṇa's Aśhoka grove.

HASTIMUKHA: a *rākṣhasa*.

HIMĀLAYA: the mountain range that forms the northern boundary of India; personified as Himavat. Śhiva's wife Umā, and Gaṅgā, are the two daughters of Himavat and Menakā. According to another legend they had three daughters – Ekaparnā who lived on a leaf of the *parṇa* tree, Ekapāṭalā who lived on the leaf of the *pāṭalā* tree, and Aparṇā who lived on no leaf. Aparṇā was refused by Śhiva when she sought his love and she practised tapasyā so strict that she refused to eat anything, even a leaf. Her mother was so disturbed that she cried out "U-mā" meaning "Oh, don't!" for which reason she is called Umā. Ultimately Śhiva agreed to make her his consort though they are always quarrelling.

HIRANYA-GARBHA: literally, "golden womb". According to the R̥g-veda this is the golden primeval egg which floats on the cosmic waters before creation begins. The egg splits into two, the golden half of the shell becoming the sky and the silver half becoming the earth. "The outer membrane became the mountains; the inner clouds and mists; the veins became the rivers, and the fluid the oceans"

HORSE-SACRIFICE: The Aśhvamedha was a sacrifice performed by the kings to indicate their total suzerainty, or to obtain children or expiate a sin. It was a highly elaborate affair, culminating in the ritual of all four queens circling the dead horse nine times with the chief queen participating in a symbolic physical union with the corpse. The last horse sacrifice was performed by the ruler of Jaipur in Rājasthān in the eighteenth century.

HRASVAKARṆA a *rākṣhasa* in Rāvaṇa's court.

HRI: Or Hara; one of the names of Śhiva; literally, "one who removes (impurities)".

IKṢHVĀKU. grandson of Vivasvat, the sun, the founder of the Solar dynasty which ruled in Ayodhyā at the beginning of the second yuga.

INDRA: a Vedic deity, the god of lightning, thunder and rain, and also the chief god in heaven. He is golden-coloured and four-armed. His weapon is the thunderbolt and he has a net of magic called Indraajāla with which he deludes and confuses his opponents.

INDRAJIT: the title of Meghanāda, son of Rāvaṇa. He has the power to make himself invisible. In a war against the gods, he took Indra prisoner, for which reason Brahmā named him Indrajit, "conqueror of Indra."

JABĀLI: the *purohita* of Rājā Daśharatha; he was an extraordinarily sharp-

- witted man who employed the subtleties of the Nyāya school of philosophy in a debate with Rāma.
- JĀHNAVĪ:** another name of the Gaṅgā. Jahnu was a *ṛṣhi* who drank up the Gaṅgā because the river's flow upset his meditation; later he permitted the Gaṅgā to stream out of his ear; hence her name as "daughter of Jahnu."
- JAMADAGNI:** Brāhmin son of Ṛichika and Satyavati (daughter of the Kṣhatriya king Gādhi). According to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* her Brāhmin husband Ṛichika gave her special gruel to eat when she was pregnant so that her son could be born with a Brāhmin's qualities. Another preparation of gruel was given to her mother so that she might have a son of Kṣhatriya qualities. The women exchanged the gruels and Jamadagni was born as a Kṣhatriya-Brāhmin and Viśhvāmitra, son of Kṣhatriya Gādhi, was born a Brāhmin. Jamadagni's wife was Reṇukā who bore him five sons, the last being Paraśhurāma. One day she saw two lovers bathing in a stream and felt envious. This so infuriated Jamadagni that he ordered all his five sons one by one to kill her. When they refused he turned them into imbeciles. Only Paraśhurāma agreed and cut off his mother's head with his axe. Jamadagni then restored his four sons to normality and his wife to life. When king Kārtavīrya's sons killed Jamadagni, Paraśhurāma promised to destroy the entire Kṣhatriya race in a classic case of over-kill by exterminating the Kṣhatriya caste thrice seven times.
- JĀMBAVĀN:** chief of the bears who helps Rāma in his invasion of Laṅkā.
- JAMBHA** name of a *rākṣhasa* in Rāvana's palace.
- JAMBU,** a mythical river which flows from Mount Meru; its source is the sap of the Jambu tree which grows in the centre of Meru and its waters produce a gold called Jambunāda.
- JANAKA:** the rājā of Videha and father of Sītā. His priest was the well-known Brāhmin Yājñavalkya. Janaka is also called Śhīradhvaja ("whose flag is the plough") because his daughter Sītā was born out of the ploughed earth.
- JĀNAKĪ:** literally, daughter of Janaka; another name of Sītā.
- JANASTHĀNA:** the site in the Daṇḍaka forest where Rāma briefly passed his exile.
- JAṬĀYU:** son of Viṣṇu's bird-vehicle Garuḍa; he is the chief of vultures who is fatally wounded by Rāvana when he tries to save Sītā.
- JAVA:** father of the anti-god Viradha.
- JAYĀ:** daughter of Dakṣha; a goddess who devises and grants weapons to her devotees.
- JAYANTA:** a minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.
- JYOTIMUKHA:** a *vānara* hero.

KABANDHA: an anti-god killed by Rāma and Lakṣhmaṇa.

KADAMBA: is a flowering tree, the *Nauclea Cadamba*. "An East Indian shade tree of the family Rubiaceae having hard yellowish wood and globose clusters of flowers" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

KAIKEYĪ: the princess of Kaikeya, the favourite wife of Rājā Daśharatha, and mother of his third son Bharata.

KAILĀSA: is the most significant mountain in Hindu mythology, towards the East of Mount Meru. Geographically it is situated in Tibet. The mountain is sacred to Śhiva and is sometimes worshipped as a Śhiva liṅga. Pilgrims are supposed to circumambulate this mountain, the total distance of reverence being about twenty-five miles. Lake Mānasarovara lies at the foot of Kailāsa.

KAKUBA: the Arjuna tree, a tall evergreen species of Neem; the botanical name is *Termanalia Arjuna*.

KĀLA: Time personified, "the power that limits the existence of eternal elements in matter." Literally, "black"; hence the feminine is Kālī, Time personified as a dark goddess.

KĀLA-CHAKRA: literally, "the circle of time"; the whirligig of existence.

KĀLANĀJARA: name of a monastery.

KĀLINDĪ: another name of the Yamunā because it is supposed to have its source in the mythical mountain of Kālinda.

KĀLIYA: 1) a five-headed, fire-spitting snake who lived in the Kālindī river and harassed the local shepherds until Kṛiṣṇa subdued him underfoot and ordered him to go away to the ocean; 2) name of one of Rāma's courtiers.

KALI-YUGA: the four yugas or ages are named Kṛita, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali. The Kali-yuga is the present age of mankind and it began at midnight of February 17th 3102 B.C., immediately at the end of the Dvāpara-yuga, when Abhimanyu's son Parikshit was crowned king of Hastināpura. The Kali-yuga will last 360,000 years and its chief characteristic is lack of dharma. In the Kṛita-yuga procreation comes by pure wishing, in Tretā by touch, in Dvāpara by intercourse; in Kali homosexuality and irresponsible promiscuity prevail. See Yuga

KĀMA, the god of love who rides a parrot and carries sugarcane bow, a bow string of black bees and flower-tipped arrows. His wife is Rati (erotic desire) and he is supposed to be son of Dharma and Śhraddhā; or the son of Lakṣhmi; or even sometimes born of water. He is sometimes called Anaṅga, the bodiless one.

KANAKA: a variety of gold.

KANDA: a *vānara* hero.

KANḌU: is a well-known *ṛiṣhi* who was seduced by the *apsarā* Pramlochā. He made love to her for a hundred years; after the erotic union his sperm became her perspiration which was collected on the leaves of trees as she passed by, and so she was transformed by moonlight into a bewitching girl called Mārīṣhā.

KARKA: the astrological sign of Cancer.

KARMA: is the entire complex of cause and effect, action and reaction which governs deeds, thoughts and feelings; in Hindu philosophy it is also used to explain the chain of birth and rebirth. "Because of karma we are eternally bound to the wheel of *saṁsāra*, or birth death rebirth. Karma is thus seen to be a cosmic law for debit and credit for good and evil; a law of moral

retribution, eternally recurring. Karma does not create, it only adjusts the effects of action."

KARṆIKĀRAS: popularly known as Kaniyar, this is one of the laburnums growing in India. The Latin name is *Pterospermum Acerifolium* or the *Cassia Fistula*.

KĀRUṢHA: name of a territory and also the people inhabiting it; possibly Malwa, at the back of the Vindhya mountains; the people claim descent from Karuṣha, one of the sons of Manu Vaivasvata.

KĀSHYAPA: one of Rāma's friends in the palace—named after one of the seven primal *ṛishis* who was the mind born son of Brahmā, sometimes associated with Dhruva the Pole Star; he is the father of Vivasvat and grandfather of the first Manu. The thirteen daughters of Dakṣha were his wives, along with many others. Through Aditi he fathered the Ādityas; through Ariṣṭā and Munī he fathered the Gandharvas; through Diti the antigods and Daityas; through Danu the Dānavas, through Vinatā, Garuḍa; through Kadrū the Nāgas; through Kāshā the Yakshas and *rākṣhasas*; through Krodhā all the carnivorous creatures. He is therefore Prajāpati, father of all; he is also the *purohita* of Paraśhurāma and Rāma.

KAUŚHALYĀ: wife of Daśharatha and mother of Rāma.

KAUŚHIKĪ: is the river Kośhī in Bihār.

KAUSTUBHA: is the gem which appeared out of the primal churning of the ocean (see *amṛita*). It was taken by Viṣṇu as soon as produced and worn on his chest; it is also worn on Kṛiṣṇa's chest.

KĀVYA: literally, "poem"; usually a long poem which was popular in Sanskrit literature during the 5th-8th centuries A.D. There are supposed to be seven model *kāvyas*: *Raghuvamśha* and *Kumārasambhava* by Kālidāsa (circa 470 A.D.), *Kirātārjuniya* by Bharavi (circa 550 A.D.), *Bhūtī-kāvya* said to be by Bhartṛhari (circa 650 A.D.), *Śhīshupālavadha* by Magha (circa 700 A.D.), *Jānakīharana* which is the story of the *Rāmāyana* re-told by Kumāradāsa (circa 670 A.D.) and *Naiṣādhacharita* by Śhrīharṣha of Bengal (circa 1180 A.D.). The *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* are also *kāvyas*, that is, epics.

KEŚHINĪ: 1) the name of a river outside Ayodhyā, 2) mother of Kumbha-karṇa.

KHADIRA: is the betelnut palm also known as the *Acacia Catechu* which grows in many parts of coastal India; its nut is used as an ingredient in pan, "a preparation in betelnut which is rolled in betel leaf with a little shell lime and is used especially in India and East Indies for chewing" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

KHARA: a *rākṣhasa*, brother of Rāvaṇa; he was killed by Rāma.

KINNARAS: literally, "what men?" They are followers of Kubera with the head of a horse and the body of a bird who was supposed to have been born from Brahma's toe. They are singers and musicians in Kubera's court, dwelling in the foothills of the Himālayas.

KĪRTĪ: name of a nymph who personifies success and achievement.

KIṢHKINDHA: very likely the modern Mysore, a kingdom usurped by Vāli which was returned by Rāma to Vāli's brother Sugrīva.

KOKILA: the koel, the black or Indian cuckoo; *Cuculus Indicus*, or *Eudynamis scolopacea homorata*.

KOSALA: is probably the territory south of the Vindhya mountains; it was the kingdom of Daśharatha, its capital being Ayodhyā. South and North Kosala were separated by the river Sarayū.

KRAUŇCHA: 1) a species of curlew or heron, the *Ardea Jaculator*; 2) a mountain which is a part of the Kailāsa mountain range.

KṚṢHṆA: the eighth avatāra of Viṣṇu. Son of Vasudeva and Devakī. Since Vasudeva was also Kuntī's brother, Kṛṣhṇa is the cousin of Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna.

KṢHATRIYA: the second caste—the warrior and administrator—in Hinduism's four-fold social division of Brāhmins (teachers and priests), Kṣhatryias, Vaiśhyas (merchants and traders), and Śhūdras (labourers and menials). The "untouchables" fall outside the four castes.

KUBERA: literally, "displeasing body"; he is the chief of malicious and malignant spirits; he is also known as Vaiśhravana, half-brother of Rāvaṇa. His territory was Lankā which was actually the summit of Mount Meru. Rāvaṇa drove him out of Laṅkā south into the ocean where it became the present Śhrī Laṅkā. Kubera is worshipped by Yakṣhas and Yakṣhis. He is shown as white-complexioned, with eight teeth, three legs and distorted body; he usually rides on the shoulders of a man.

KULA: One of the friends of Rāma in the palace in Ayodhyā.

KUMBHAKARṆA: son of Viśhravas by his *rākṣhasa* wife Keśhini; therefore he is Rāvaṇa's brother who by order of Brahmā slept six months continuously, waking for one day only and then going into half-annual slumber again. In popular Hindu imagination he is a prototype of the enormously lazy but physically powerful man.

KUŚHA: 1) name of the second twin son of Rāma and Sītā. After Rāma's death he became king of northern Kosala in his capital called Kuśhasthali. 2) another name for *darbha* grass (see *darbha*).

KUTSA: a learned Brāhmin in Rāma's court.

LAKṢHMAṆA: son of Rājā Daśharatha by his wife Sumitrā; twin brother of Śhatrughana and half-brother of Rāma. He married Urmilā and had two sons Aṅgada and Chandraketu.

LAKṢHMĪ: also called Śhrī, is the goddess of prosperity, consort of Viṣṇu and mother of Kāma. She was born out of the primeval milk ocean, lotus in hand (see *amṛita*). In the *Rāmāyana* she is incarnated as Sītā.

LANKĀ: the island republic of Śhrī Lankā at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula; the island-kingdom of Rāvaṇa (see Kubera).

LAVA: Twin son of Rāma and Sītā; his capital was Śhrāvastī.

LOKARĀMA: Literally, "world-delighter"; an appellation of Rāma.

LOṬĀ: "a small usually spherical water vessel of brass or copper used in India" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

- MĀDHAVĪ:** 1) the creeper *Bassia Latifolia*; also the name of a plant from whose flowers the *mādhavikā* honey is prepared; 2) the name of the earth goddess.
- MADHUKA:** "the Illipi Butter Tree. A large deciduous tree with thick grey bark found in dry rocky hill regions. Valuable for its delicious and nutritive flowers which bloom at night and fall to the ground at dawn. They taste something like figs. . ." (Hari Prasād Śhāstrī).
- MADHUMATTA:** a courtier in Rāma's palace.
- MAHĀ-MUNI:** "mahā=large, great; muni=a Hindu hermit sage" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- MAHĀPĀRŚHVA:** a *rdkṣha* warrior in Rāvana's army.
- MAHĀRĀJA:** "A Hindu prince ranking above a *rājā*" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- MAHĀRĪSHI:** great *ṛṣhi*. A *ṛṣhi* is "a holy Hindu sage, saint, or inspired poet" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- MAHĀTMĀ** "(fr. *mahat* great+*ātman* soul—more at MUCH, ĀTMAN) a person held worthy of reverence for highmindedness, wisdom, and selflessness" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- MAHENDRA:** another name of Indra; literally, "great Indra".
- MAINDA:** a *vānaru* leader.
- MĀLYAVĀN:** Rāvana's father-in-law; Mandodari's father.
- MANASĀ:** or Mānasarovara; literally, "lake of the inner mind". It is located on the summit of Mt. Kailāsa, which is probably the most sacred mountain in Hindu mythology. The Sutlej river originates nearby.
- MANDĀKINĪ:** or the Piṣhuni, a river on whose bank was situated Chitrakūṭa, the site of Vālmiki's ashram. Some scholars say it is the Kālīgaṅgā which has its source in the Kedara mountain in Gārhvāl.
- MAṆḌALA:** circle; group, cluster; "a graphic mystic symbol of the universe that is typically in the form of a circle enclosing a square and often bearing symmetrically arranged representations of deities and is used chiefly in Hinduism and Buddhism as an aid to meditations" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).
- MANDARA:** the mountain that was used as the churning rod by the gods and anti-gods during the churning of the primeval milk ocean. In popular belief it is in Bhāgalpur in Bihār and it is a broken fragment of Mount Meru.
- MĀṆḌAVĪ:** wife of Rāma's brother Bharata; daughter of Kuśhadhvaja who was a brother of Janaka and therefore uncle of Sītā. His other daughter Śhrutakīrti married Śhatrughna. Some describe him as the king of Kāśhī.
- MANDODARĪ:** the chief queen of Rāvaṇa and mother of Indrajit.
- MAṆḌALA:** a courtier in Rāma's palace.
- MANIBHADRA:** a yakṣha defeated by Rāvaṇa's general Prahasta on Mt. Kailāsa.
- MANTHARĀ:** 1) the hunchback maid of Queen Kaikeyī; she malignly influenced Kaikeyī to persuade Rājā Daśharatha to exile Rāma; 2) daughter of Virochana, an anti-god.
- MANTRA:** mantras are a part of the Vedic Samhitā, or collection of hymns,

They are metrically arranged words or sentences of mystic power. "A verbal spell, ritualistic incantation on mystic formula used devotionally in popular Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

MANU: 1) the first man; 2) the title given to superhuman world-creators who rule over a certain period of time. There are fourteen Manus: Svayambhuva who is also Manu the law giver, Svārochiṣha, Uttama, Tamasa, Raivata, Chakṣhuka, Vaivasvata, Savaṛṇa; the next six Manus are called Dakṣha-savaṛṇa, Brahma-savaṛṇa, Dharma-savaṛṇa, Rudra-savaṛṇa, Rauchya, Bhautya.

MĀRĪCHA: is a rākṣhasa who disguises himself as a bejewelled deer to attract Rāma away from his āshram and leave the field clear for Rāvana to abduct Sītā.

MARU: is the name of the desert which was created by the destructive impact of Rāma's arrows in the region of Draumyakulya.

MARUTA: the wind god who is father of Hanumān.

MARUTS: the tempest deities who are the sons of Rudra or sons of the ocean or even the earth. According to the *Rāmāyaṇa* they are forty-nine, fragments of Diti's son who was splintered in the womb by Indra's thunderbolt.

MRITASAMJIVANĪ, literally, "reviver of the dead". One of the four magical herbs found on Mount Rīṣhabha and brought back by Hanumān to restore the slain warriors of Rāma's army to life.

NABHAGA: son of Yayāti and father of Aja who was the father of Daśharatha.

NĀGA: literally, the cobra; the term is applied to various tribals living in forests. The city of Nāgpur in modern India testifies to their historical existence. Mythically they are supposed to be the offspring of Kadrū, the wife of Kaśhyapa.

NAHUṢHA: is the son of Ayus and father of Yayāti; he apparently angered the Brāhmins by his insolent behaviour and was cursed by Indra to fall from his splendid chariot and become a serpent.

NAIMISHA: probably the forest around Nīmkharāvaṇa on the River Gomatī about 45 miles from Lucknow. This is the forest where Rāma performed his Horse Sacrifice.

NALA: is a *vānara* hero, son of Viśhvakarma who had the ability to make stones float on water and therefore was entrusted to build the bridge called Rāmasetu or Nalasetu from the mainland to Lāṅkā.

NAMASKĀRA: the traditional Hindu form of respectful greeting consisting of pressing the palms together and raising them to one's chest or head, depending upon the reverence to be displayed corresponding to the dignity and eminence of the person, while simultaneously bowing one's head low. Literally, "respectful bow."

NAMASTE: literally, "I bow to you". See *namaskāra*.

NAMUCHI: An anti-god who could not be killed by either day or night or any wet or dry weapon; so Indra killed him by a ruse by slicing off Namuchi's head at twilight by sea-foam which, strictly speaking, is neither wet nor dry.

NANDANA: is the garden (literally, "place of delight") in the celestial kingdom of Indra whose capital is Amarāvati ("immortal city"), and palace Vaijayanta ("site of victory").

NANDIGRĀMA: the modern Nandgāon in Avadh about 8 miles south of Faizābād where Bharata ruled on Rāma's behalf during Rāma's exile.

NĀRADA: is one of the seven mahā-ṛṣhis, chief of the gandharvas and inventor of the vīṇā, "a musical instrument of India having usually four strings and a long bamboo finger board with moveable frets and a gourd resonator at each end" (Webster's). Nārada is a questioning, difficult-to-please Brāhmin who poses impossible questions to gods and human beings and is therefore treated with respectful awe by everyone he comes in contact with.

NARANTAKA: is the son of Rāvana; literally, "annihilator of men".

NĀRĀYAṆA: literally, "one who shelters in the waters". A name of Viṣṇu the preserving aspect of the Hindu divine trinity, so called because Viṣṇu sleeps on the cosmic water serpent Śheṣhanāga. Nārāyaṇa can also be rendered as "refuge of man."

NIKUMBHA: is Kumbhakarna's son and military adviser to Rāvaṇa.

NĪLA: literally, "blue-skinned"; a *vānara* general who assists Rāma.

NIŚHĀDA: a hill tribe in the Vindhya range.

PADMAKA: is the plant *Costus Arabicus*; a fir tree whose wood is used for a variety of purposes, specially for the ritual funeral pyre.

PALĀŚHA: the tree *Butea Frondosa*, or the *Curcuma Zedoaria*; commonly known as the flame-of-the-forest; found in the plains of India; it has rich orange-red flowers and blossoms in the summer.

PAMPĀ: a river which has its source in the Rṣhyamūka mountain. It is a tributary of the Tungabhadra in the district of Bellary, north of the city of Hampi; also the name of a lake.

PĀNASA: the tree *Artocarpus Intergrifolia* which has a bread-fruit weighing upto fifty kilograms.

PAÑCHAVAṬĪ: possibly the city Nāsik on the river Godāvari where Rāma passed a large part of his exile; called Nāsik (nose) because Lakṣhmana cut off Śhūrpanakhā's nose in Pañchavaṭī.

PANḌIT: 1) a wise or learned man in India—often used before a name as an honorary title; 2) a Brāhmin expert in Sanskrit and in the science, laws, and religion of the Hindus" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

PARAŚHURĀMA: literally, "Rāma-with-axe"; the sixth avatāra of Viṣṇu (see avatāra). In the *Rāmāyaṇa* he appears as the adversary of Rāma because as an earlier incarnation he is apparently jealous of Rāma with whom he appears contemporaneously. (See Jamadagni).

PĀTĀLA: the underworld kingdom inhabited by the Nāgas. It is also called Nāgaloka or Kāmaloka because it provides every possible pleasure. Its capital is Bhogavatī ("city of pleasure").

PATNI: literally, "the protected one"; wife.

PIŚHĀCHA: blood-drinking and malignant spirits who are classed inferior to the rākṣhasas. According to the Purānas, they are children of Kaśhyapa by his wife Piśhāchā.

PITĀMAHA: literally, "paternal grandfather". Applied to Brahmā as the primal creator of all life.

PITṚI: "*Hinduism*: a deceased forefather viewed as semi-divine" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

PRADAKṢHINĀ: "reverential salutation by circumambulation from left to right so that the right side is towards the person saluted" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

PRAHASTA: one of the generals in Rāvaṇa's army.

PAJĀPATI: literally, "lord of creatures". Manu uses the description for Brahmā who is the Creator and therefore the Lord of creatures. It is also applied to the ten mind-born sons of Brahmā who are the original progenitors of mankind: Marīchi, Atri, Aṅgīras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Vasīṣṭha, Prachetas or Dakṣha, Bhṛigu, and Nārada. Some make the Prajapatis seven; in *Mahābhārata* twenty-one are listed.

PRANĀMA: "bending, bowing, a bow; respectful or reverential salutation, prostration, obeisance specially to a Brāhmin or to a deity" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

PRĀÑJALI: "the open hands placed side by side and slightly hollowed, as if by beggar to receive food; hence when raised to the forehead, a mark of supplication, reverence, salutation or benediction" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

PRASRAVAṆA: name of a mountain in Janasthāna near the Tuṅgabhadra river where Rāma spent a part of his exile in a cave.

PRAYĀGA: the modern Allāhābād also known as Trivenī ("triple-braided") because the three holy rivers, Gaṅgā, Yamunā and the subterranean Sarasvatī mingle here to make one of Hinduism's holiest places of pilgrimage.

PRIṢHATA: a spotted deer.

PRIYĀ: a female beloved; a term of intimate endearment.

PRIYE: see *priyā*.

PŪJĀ: "a Hindu act of worship or propitiation" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

PULASTYA: one of the Prajāpatis; a mind-born son of Brahmā; father of Viśhravas, who was the father of Kubera and Rāvaṇa; progenitor of the rākshasa race.

PUNARVASU: is the seventh and the most auspicious *nakṣatra* or constellation. The Hindu Zodiac is divided into twelve signs and further subdivided into twentyseven *nakṣatras* though different books list them differently: 1) Aśhvini, 2) Bharāṇi, 3) Kṛittikā, 4) Rohiṇī, 5) Mṛigaśhīras, 6) Ārdra,

7) Punarvasu, 8) Puṣhyā, 9) Aśleṣhā, 10) Maghā, 11) Pūrva-phalgunī, 12) Uttara-phalgunī, 13) Hasta, 14) Chitrā, 15) Svāti 16) Viśākhā, 17) Anurādhā, 18) Jyeshthā, 19) Mūla, 20) Pūrvāśhādhā, 21) Uttarāśhādhā, 22) Abhijit, 23) Śhravanā, 24) Dhanishthā 25) Śhatabhishāj, 26) Pūrva-bhādrapadā, 27) Uttara-bhādrapadā, 28) Revatī (included only if Abhijit is omitted).

PUÑJIKASTHALĀ: an apsarā who was abducted and raped by Rāvaṇa.

PURĀṆA: literally, "old". Collections of myths, legends and folklore dealing with the lives and exploits of Hindu divinities. Each *Purāṇa* has five sections: 1) The creation of the universe, 2) Its dissolution and re-creation, 3) The genealogy of gods and Prajāpatis, 4) The life stories of the Manus and their yugas known as *manvantaras*, 5) The history of the Solar and Lunar royal dynasties. There are eighteen *Purāṇas* and eighteen *Upa-Purāṇas* or minor *Purāṇas*. Six *Purāṇas* are classified as those with *sattva* (purity) – Viṣṇu, Nārādīya, Bhāgavata, Garuḍa, Padma, Varāha; these are the Vaiṣṇavite *Purāṇas*. Then come the six Brāhmic *Purāṇas* in which *rajas* or energy is dominant—Brahma, Brahmāṇḍa, Brahmavaivarta, Mārkaṇḍeya, Bhaviṣhya and Vāmana. The six Śhaivite *Purāṇas* with *tamas* or the quality of gloom and ignorance are: Matsya, Kūrma, Liṅga, Śhiva, Skanda, and Agni. The longest *Purāṇa* is the Skanda with over eighty thousand śhlokas and the shortest is Vāmana with about ten thousand śhlokas.

PUROHITA: Hindu priest, usually attached to a family.

PURŪRAVAS: a mythical person of royal lineage who has five sons by the apsarā Urvaśhī. Hero of Kālidāsa's play *Vikrama and Urvaśhī*.

PURUṢHOTTAMA: literally, "finest of men". Also used in the sense of "supreme soul"—another name for Viṣṇu, and hence an epithet of Kṛiṣhna.

PUṢHKARA: literally, "blue lotus". 1) A general in Varuna's army; 2) name of a lake five miles from Ajmer.

PUṢHPAKA: literally, "flowery vehicle". The aerial chariot given by Brahmā to Kubera, half-brother of Rāvana; it was appropriated by Rāvana after he defeated Kubera. After defeating Rāvaṇa, Rāma returned in it with Sītā to Ayodhyā and restored it to Kubera.

PUṢHYA: an auspicious constellation of three stars.

PUTREṢHTI: a ritual performed to obtain male progeny.

RĀGHAVA: descendant of Raghu, a king of the solar dynasty. Raghu was the son of king Dilīpa and great-grandfather of Rāma. Therefore Rāghava is a name of Rāma.

RAGHU: see Rāghava.

RĀHU: Rāhu and Ketu are the ascending and descending nodes in astronomy. In Hindu mythology Rāhu is a Daitya who drank the nectar at the churning of the milk ocean by disguising himself. He was punished by Viṣṇu after the sun and the moon reported the misdemeanour. He was cut in two, his top part becoming Rāhu, represented as the head of a dragon, and his lower part becoming Ketu, the dragon's tail. Rāhu revenges himself

by swallowing the sun and the moon during eclipses.

RĀJAGRĪHA: the capital of Magadha situated between Paṭṇā and Gayā; literally, "the house of the king".

RĀKṢHASA: according to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* rākṣhasas are descendants of Kaśhyapa and Khaśhā; according to the *Rāmāyaṇa* they are beings created by Brahmā to guard the waters at the beginning of creation; their name is derived from *rakṣh*, to protect. They are able to take any shape or form they desire though not at all times. It is likely that the name was applied to some tribes of south India and other dark-skinned Drāviḍian people by the Āryan rulers of the north.

RĀKṢHASĪ: feminine of rākṣhasa.

RĀMA: elder son of Daśharatha; hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, avatāra of Viṣṇu in the Tretā Yuga. Rāma stands as an idealised figure who is involved in and yet somehow transcends the limitations of the feudal age. By accepting the primacy of his subjects who suspect Sītā's purity and taking their demand above the word of his wife, he becomes the embodiment of the self-sacrificing dedicated monarch. An excellent account of the character of Rāma and variations of the Rāma legend can be found in K. Bulcke's study *Rāma-Kathā* (Allāhābād, 1950).

RĀMĀYAṆA: literally, "the wanderings of Rāma".

RAMBHĀ: an apsarā created at the churning of the milk ocean and considered as the ideal of Indian female beauty. Indra ordered her to seduce Viśhvāmitra who cursed her to petrification for a thousand years. Rāvana was so infatuated by her when he saw her on Mount Kailāsa that, in spite of her protests that she was married to Nala-Kubera, son of his half-brother Kubera, he ravished her.

RASATĀLA: in Hindu mythology, a territory at the bottom of the ocean, it is one of the regions of hell which was discovered by the sons of Sagara.

RAṢHMIKETU: a rākṣhasa killed by Rāma.

RĀṢHTRAVARDHANA: a minister in the court of Rāma.

RATĪ: wife of Kāma, the god of love; daughter of Dakṣha, she is also called Kāmī, Pritī, and Kāmapriyā or "beloved of Kāma".

RĀVAṆA: son of Viśhravas and Nikāṣhā, who was the daughter of the rākṣhasa Sumāli. He is the grandson of the ṛṣhi Pulastya, and half-brother of Kubera. His sons were Indrajit (also called Meghanāda), Rāvani, Akṣha, Triśhīras, Devāntaka, Narāntaka and Atikāya. King of Laṅkā, and an extraordinarily accomplished person.

REṆUKĀ: daughter of Rājā Prasenajit; wife of Jamadagni and mother of Paraśhurāma. See Paraśhurāma.

RIG: The Rīg is the first of the four Vedas, which are revealed (*śhruti*, 'heard') scriptures of Hinduism, the other three being Yajur, Sāma and Atharva. Each Veda consists of two sections: Mantra which is a collection of prayers, psalms, and benedictions in verse, and prose Brāhmaṇas which are interpretations, commentaries and ritual glosses.

RIKṢHA: literally, "one with a shining coat"; a kind of bear.

RIṢHABHA: a leader of the *vdnaras*.

RIṢHABHASKANDHA: a well-known *vānara* hero.

RIṢHI: see *mahāriṣhi*.

RIṢHYA: the male of a species of Himālayan antelope—the painted or white-footed antelope.

RIṢHYAMŪKA: the mountain where Rāma took temporary refuge with the *vānara* leader Sugrīva.

RIṢHYASHRĪṄGA: literally, “one with the horns of an antelope”. Son of Vibhāṇḍaka; *riṣhi* who married Daśharatha’s daughter Śhāntā who was adopted by king Lomapada. *Riṣhyaśrīṅga* performed the *yajña* for Rāma’s birth.

RITVIKS: a Hindu priest who offers oblations at the installation of a king.

ROHINĪ: see *nakṣatra*. 1) daughter of Kaśhyapa and Surabhī and hence sister of Nandinī; 2) one of the wives of Vasudeva, Kṛiṣṇa’s father, and mother of Balarāma; 3) one of the wives of Kṛiṣṇa.

ROMAPĀDA: king of Aṅga; foster-father of Śhāntā.

ROMAṢHA: a *vānara* chief.

RUDRAS: sons of Kaśhyapa and Aditi.

SA-DHARMA-CHĀRINĪ: literally, “a companion on the path of dharma”; hence, a Hindu wife.

SĀDHU: a holy man who has renounced material pleasures and adopted self-mortification in order to achieve mokṣha.

SĀDHU: literally, “Well done! Good!”

SAGARA: a ruler of Ayodhyā of the Solar dynasty. He had two wives: Sumatī, daughter of Kaśhyapa, and Keśhini, who were both childless. The *riṣhi* Aurva gave them a boon by which Keśhini had one son and Sumatī sixty-thousand. Sagara ordered his sixty-thousand sons to dig a tunnel to Pātāla in order to recover the ritual horse for his Aśhvamedha sacrifice; hence Sāgara meaning “ocean” is sometimes used for the river Gaṅgā.

ŚĀL (Śāla): or Śhāla; the Shorea Robusta or Valeria Robusta—“one of the most valuable Indian timber trees.”

SĀMA: the third of the four Vedas or revealed scriptures of Hinduism. The Sāma Veda has 1549 śhlokas addressed mostly to Soma, Agni and Indra; these hymns to Nature possess an extraordinary poetic and lyrical quality.

SAMSKĀRAS: literally, “making perfect”; essential sanctifying ceremonies for Hinduism’s first three castes; the law-giver Manu in his *Manu-saṁhita* (II: 27) lists twelve though sometimes the last two are omitted: 1) *garbhā-dhāna* (“womb-welcome”) performed at the first indication of pregnancy or at puberty; 2) *pūṁsavarna* (“male-birth”) performed at the first stirrings in the embryo; 3) *sīmantonayana* (“parting the hair”) performed to a pregnant woman in the fourth, sixth or eighth month of her first pregnancy; 4) *jātakarman* (“birth ritual”) which involves giving the baby ghee out of a golden spoon before severing the umbilical cord; 5) *nāmakarana* (“name-giving”) done on the tenth or twelfth day after birth; 6) *niṣkramaṇa* (“taking out”) which involves taking the child out when three months old

to see the sun or the moon; 7) *annaprāśhana* ("feeding with rice") when the child is given boiled rice or sweetened rice six months after birth; 8) *chūḍā-karman* or *chūḍākarana* ("tonsure ritual") which involves shaving off all the hair on the head with the exception of the *chūḍā* or top tuft, performed in the first or third year after birth; 9) *upanayana* ("thread ceremony"), the most important ritual comprising of the investiture of the sacred thread; 10) *keśhānta* ("cutting off the hair"); 11) *samāvartana* ("return") performed after a student completes his studies and 12) *vivāha* ("marriage").

SAM̐DHYĀ: morning or evening twilight.

SAMPĀTI: a *vānara* warrior.

SANATKUMĀRA: one of the four Kumāras or mind-born sons of Brahmā, the other three being Sanaka, Sananda and Sanātana.

SANDHANI: one of the four magical herbs found on Mt. Rīṣhabha, and brought by Hanumān to cure wounded and revive dead soldiers in Rāma's army; the other three are Sañjivakaraṇi, Suvarṇakarani and Viśhālayi.

SAÑJĪVAKARAṆI: See Sandhani.

SĀNUPRASTHA: one of the ten *vānara* army leaders.

SARAMĀ: wife of Vibhīṣhana.

SARASVATĪ: literally, "liquidy, rivery"; a river that flows between the Śhatadru and the Yamunā; personified as a goddess, she symbolises the power of speech and learning; she is the goddess of wisdom, consort of Brahmā the Creator, and also the originator of the Sanskrit language. She wears white and sits on a lotus, has either two or eight arms in which she holds a vīṇā, a book, a rosary, and an elephant goad, or sometimes an arrow, a mace, a spear, a discuss, a conch, a bell, a plough, and a bow.

SARAYU: a river, the modern Gorga in Uttara Pradesh; Ayodhyā was situated on the Sarayu.

SARVATHA-SIDDHA: a Brāhmin who injures a harmless dog and is punished for his misdemeanour; the story is told in the last book of the *Rāmāyana*.

SATYA: literally, "truth".

SEVEN SAGES: "*sapta-ṛṣhi*", the Great Bear constellation.

ŚHARBARĪ: a female ascetic of low caste who was visited and honoured by Rāma for her unswerving religious devotion. She was up-casted for her dedicated waiting for Rāma, after seeing whom she climbed a funeral pyre and was rewarded by being taken to heaven.

ŚHACHĪ: wife of Indra, mother of Jayanta and Jayantī.

ŚHAMBARA: an anti-god, a personification of drought (in the Vedas); an anti-god who was killed by Pradyumna (in the *Purāṇas*).

ŚHĀNTĀ: daughter of Daśharatha; she was adopted by Lomapāda or Romapāda, king of Aṅga, and married to Rīṣhyaśhrīṅga (q.v.).

ŚHARABA: chief of the bears who assist Rāma in his invasion of Laṅkā.

ŚHĀSTRA: "any sacred book or composition of divine or standard authority" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

ŚHATĀNANDA: son of the ṛṣhi Gautama, and purohita of rājā Janaka, father of Sītā.

ŚHATAVALI: a *vānara* hero.

ŚHATRUGHNA: literally, "destroyer of enemies"; son of king Daśharatha by his wife Sumitrā.

ŚHIBI: a ruler of the Rāghava dynasty, renowned for his self-sacrifice in saving a pigeon from a predatory hawk by offering his own flesh in lieu of the pigeon's.

ŚHIVA: literally, "auspicious". The Hindu Divinity as Lord of Destruction. (see *Brahmā*).

ŚHLESHMĀTAKA: name of a tree, the *Cordia Myxa*, which flowers in spring.

ŚHLOKA: "a particular kind of common epic metre (also called *anuṣṭubh*, consisting of four *pādas* or quarter verses of eight syllables each, or two lines of sixteen syllables each" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

ŚHOKA: grief, in the sense of compassionate sorrow for another's suffering.

ŚHRĪ: literally, "gracious, benevolent, auspicious"; the goddess Lakshmī, consort of Viṣṇu, the preserving aspect of the Hindu divine trinity (see *Brahmā*).

ŚHṚIṄGAVERA: name of a territory adjacent to Ayodhyā, ruled by a chief named Guha.

ŚHṚIṄGAVERAPURA: See *Śhṛiṅgavera*.

ŚHRUTI: literally, "heard"; the revealed scriptures of Hinduism; the term is generally applied to the Vedas and Upanishads, See *smṛiti*.

ŚHRUTAKĪRTI: wife of Śhatrughna.

ŚHŪDRA: the fourth and last caste in Hinduism as established by Manu in his *chatur-varṇa*, the first three being the twice-born or *dvija* because they are entitled to the second birth of the sacred thread ceremony. "A member of the fourth ancient Hindu varṇa formed chiefly from conquered non-Aryans and assigned by classical law to menial occupations involving manual labour" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). The first three castes are Brāhmins, Kṣatriyas and Vaiśhyas, and Shūdra is not to be confused with untouchable which is in a sense the fifth caste, outside the pale of orthodox Hinduism.

ŚHŪRPANAKHĀ: literally, "girl with nails like winnowing fans." Sister of Rāvana who falls in love with Rāma and is rejected and humiliated by him, and nose-mutilated by Lakṣmana.

ŚHVETA: name of a mountain.

ŚHYĀMĀ: 1) the thorn-apple creeper or the *Datura Metel*, 2) the climbing plant *Ichnocarpus* or *Echites Frutescens*; 3) a small singing bird with jet-black feathers also called *Shāmā*, the *Turdus Macrourus*; 4) a banyan tree propitiated by *Sītā*.

SIDDHAS: semi-divine beings who live in the sky-space between the earth and the sun; they number 88,000; literally, "perfected mortals".

SINDHU: is the river Indus, from the Greek *Sinthes* and Arabic *Hind*, from which is derived the word *India*.

SĪTĀ: literally, "furrow". In the Vedas *Sītā* is the goddess of agricultural

fertility. Also called Ayonijā or “born wombless” because she was found by her father Janaka while cleaning a field.

SKANDA: is the god of war, son of Śhiva who flung his sperm into fire from where it was retrieved by Gaṅgā; and Kārtikeya or Skanda was the child produced. Since he is associated with violence and destruction, he is not assigned birth through any female. He rides a peacock, holding a bow in one hand arrow in the other.

SMṚITI: literally, “remembered”, as distinct from “śhruti”, “revealed”; the “non-sacred” scriptures of Hinduism, which broadly constitute the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas* and *Dharma-śhāstras*, more respected for their ethical and socially valuable teachings than their metaphysical, spiritual and mystic import.

SOMA: “an intoxicating plant juice of ancient India used as an offering to the gods and as a drink of immortality by worshippers in Vedic ritual and worshipped in personified form as Vedic god”; it is produced from “an East Indian leafless vine (*Sarcostemma acidum*) of the family Asclepiadaceae that yields a somewhat acidulous milky juice” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary). In the *Purāṇas* the Soma is personified as the moon.

SRUK: sacred ladle used in rituals; *sruvas* is another such ladle.

STHŪLAŚHĪRA: a rishi who was persecuted by the anti-god Kabandha.

SUBĀHU: 1) son of Śhatrughna 2) an anti-god who interfered with the tapasyā of Vishvamitra 3) a *vānara* hero.

SUGRĪVA: literally, “attractive neck”; the rājā of the *vānaras* whose brother Vāli usurped the kingdom which was restored to Sugrīva by the intervention of Rāma. Also called Ravinandana (“sun’s son”) because he traced his lineage from the sun.

SUKETU: a yakṣha, father of the rākṣhasī Tāṭakā.

SUMAGADHA: a courtier in the palace of Rāma.

SUMANTRA: the chief adviser to Rājā Daśharatha, also the charioteer of Rāma.

SUMITRĀ: second queen of Rājā Daśharatha, and mother of Lakṣhmaṇa and Śhatrughna.

SUNDA: 1) Father of Marīcha, 2) Brother of Upasunda; the two anti-gods Sunda and Upasunda killed each other over the apsarā Tillottamā.

SUNDARA: literally, “beautiful, handsome, charming, agreeable, right”; it is also one of the names of Kāmadeva, the god of love; the fifth book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

SUPĀRŚHVA: 1) adviser of Rāvaṇa in Laṅkā; he showed compassion towards Sītā in her lonely tribulations; 2) a mythical bird mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the son of Sampāti and nephew of Jaṭāyu.

SURAJI: a friend of Rāma in the palace of Ayodhyā.

SURASĀ: literally, “sweetly fluid”; she is a rākṣhasī, mother of the Nāgas or sea-serpents who challenged Hanumān as he flew over the ocean to Laṅkā; he escaped from being swallowed by her by compressing himself to the size of a thumb and slipping out through her right ear.

- SURĀṢHṬRA:** a minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha.
- SŪRYAŚHATRU:** a rākṣhasa general in Rāvaṇa's army.
- SUṢHENA:** 1) father of Tārā, wife of Vāli and a well-known *vānara* general;
2) a physician in Rāma's army credited with the ability of bringing dead soldiers to life by his skilful surgery.
- SUVELA:** mountain near Laṅkā where the army of Rāma pitched its camp prior to the attack on Rāvaṇa's capital; one of the three peaks of Trikūṭa, the centre peak being the foundation of Laṅkā.
- SVASTI TE-ASTU:** literally, "may all go well with you"—one of the traditional Hindu forms of greeting.
- SVĀTI:** the star Arcturus; literally, "self-existence"; one of the three wives of the sun-god Sūrya, the other two being Savarnā and Mahāvīryā [in some texts Sūrya's wives are Prabhā (light), Chhāyā (shade), Saṁjñā (knowledge), Rājñī (queen).]
- SVAYAMVARA:** literally, "self-choice"; "the election of a husband by a princess or daughter of a Kṣatriya at a public assembly of suitors held for the purpose" (Monier-Williams: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*). Svayamvara is one of the eight recognized forms of Hindu marriage.
- SYANDIKA:** name of a river.

TĀLA: the Palmyra Palm or the *Borassus Flabelliformis*, one of the commonest Indian trees which provides fermented drink from the juice of its fruit and domestic mats from its dried leaves as well as vegetables from its fruit.

TAMĀLA: name of a tree with a very dark bark (but white blossoms), the *Xanthochymus Pictorius*.

TAMASĀ: name of a river that flows about ten miles west of the Sarayu, and joins the Gaṅgā; very likely the modern river Tonse in Rewā in Madhya Pradesh. Honoured in legend as a river beside which Vālmiki composed the *Rāmāyana*.

TAPASYĀ: literally, "heat"; the creative heat generated by self-discipline, used generally to imply self-mortification, penance and physical and mental control practised in order to achieve some spiritual goal.

TĀRĀ: wife of the *vānara* rājā Vāli and mother of Aṅgada, after killing Vāli, his brother Sugrīva married her.

TĀṬAKĀ: daughter of the anti-god Sunda and mother of Maricha, she dominated the territory around the river Sarayu and persecuted its creatures and inhabitants until her death at the hands of Rāma who acted on Viśhvāmītra's instructions.

TILAK: (from *tila*, "sesame seed") "an ornamental spot worn on the forehead chiefly by the Hindus as sectarian mark" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

TIMIRDHVAJA: another name of a rākṣhasa called Śhambara.

TIṆḌUKA: a variety of ebony tree, *Diospyros Glutinosa* or *Diospyros Embryopteris*.

TRETĀ-YUGA: see Yuga.

TRIJAṬĀ: a rākṣhasī who defends Sītā against the taunts and vulgarities of the other rākṣhas's ordered by Rāvaṇa to incarcerate Sītā in the Aśhoka garden of his palace.

TRIKUṬA: literally, "triple-peaked"; the mountain on whose central peak Lankā was built.

TUMBURU: a gandharva cursed by Kubera; he was born as the anti-god Viradha.

UPSUNDA: see Sunda; name of a rākṣhasa warrior.

URMILĀ: wife of Lakṣhmaṇa; daughter of Janaka, sister of Sītā and mother of Gandharvī Somadā.

URVAŚHĪ: an apsarā who became the consort of Purūravas, and is often represented as an ideal of seductive feminine beauty.

UŚHĪRA: the fragrant root of the plant *Andropogon Muricatus*; the grass known as *Saccharum*.

UTPALA: a plant known as the *Costus Speciosus*; the blue lotus known as the *Nymphaea Caerulea*.

VAIJAYANTA: 1) the palace of Indra; 2) city in the Daṇḍaka forest which was ruled by a rākṣhasa called Śhambara.

VAIŚHYA: "a twice-born Hindu of the third ancient varna assigned by classical law to an agricultural or commercial occupation" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

VAJRADAMŚHṬRA: rākṣhasa minister advising Rāvaṇa.

VAJRAHANU: rākṣhasa minister advising Rāvaṇa.

VAKULA: a tree with scented white and pale yellow flowers; the *Mimusops Elengi*.

VĀLI: chief of the *vānaras* (or forest-folk) who was killed by Rāma whose kingdom Kiṣhkindha was restored to his brother Sugrīva. By his wife Tārā he had two sons Aṅgada and Tārā.

VĀLMĪKI: composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in whose āśhram in Chitrakūṭa Sītā gave birth to her twin sons Lava and Kuśha.

VĀMADEVA: 1) a ṛṣhi, composer of many Vedic songs; 2) a learned Brāhmin in Rāvaṇa's court.

VĀNARA: literally, "tree-man"; possibly an Āryan way of describing Drāviḍian tribes. "Monkey" is an inaccurate (and pejorative) translation, and I have scrupulously avoided it in my version.

VARĀHA: Boar; see Avatāra.

VĀRĀNASĪ: also known as Kāśhi, the modern Benares, the holy city of Hinduism.

VARUṆA: literally, "the binder", a mysterious, all-powerful Vedic deity who later came to be associated with the ocean.

VASIṢṬHA: literally, "supremely wealthy"; a Vedic ṛṣhi described by Manu

as one of the seven mahā-ṛṣhis and ten Prajāpatīs. The mythic account of his birth concerns Mitra and Varuṇa who deposited their semen in a jar in front of Urvaśhī; the two sons produced from the jar were Agastya and Vasīṣṭha. Different sources give different accounts of his glory and his feats. He was apparently the purohit of the Ikṣhvāku dynasty and had a running rivalry with another great ṛṣhi Viśhvāmītra—an enmity described in detail in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

VASUS: Eight deities, dating from Vedic times, covering the entire manifestation of cosmos. The *Mahābhārata* lists them as: 1) Dhara (support, representing the earth); 2) Āha or Ap (waters, representing space); 3) Prabhāsa (dawn, representing sky); 4) Anala (the living, representing fire); 5) Anila (one by whom one lives, representing wind); 6) Pratyūṣha (the radiant, representing the sun); 7) Soma (the offering, representing the moon); 8) Dhruva (the Pole Star, representing the constellations).

VĀYAVYA: (from *vāyu*=wind) a special weapon, possibly an arrow, having the speed and impact of a powerful wind, presumably given as a boon to its wielder by the wind god Vāyu.

VĀYU: the wind god, usually represented as a sturdily built fair-complexioned man astride a deer carrying a bow and arrows. He is a friend of Indra and rides in a golden chariot pulled by a thousand horses.

VEDA: literally, “revealed wisdom”; the most ancient scriptures of Hinduism consisting of four collections of songs and hymns supposed to have been orally transmitted by Brahmā to anonymous: Ṛig, Yajur, Sāma, Atharva. Each Veda is divided into two sections, Mantra (in verse) and Brāhmaṇa (in prose). The Yajur Veda also contains a section known as Black Yajur which is a disorganised collection of Tantric charms, curses, imprecations and the like and is considered to be of dubious origin.

VEDAŚHRUTI: literally, “the revealed wisdom of the Vedas”, name of a river.

VIBHĀṆḌAKA: father of Ṛiṣhyaśhrīṅga and son of the ṛṣhi Kaśhyapa.

VIBHĪṢHAṆA: literally, “terrifying”; younger brother of Rāvana, he received a boon from Brahmā that he would never behave meanly even in the worst crisis. He defected to Rāma and was placed on Laṅkā’s throne after Rāvana’s defeat.

VIDEHA: a kingdom ruled by Janaka whose capital was Mithilā; very likely the modern area called Tirabhukti or Tirhut comprising the districts of Champāran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga and a piece of the Nepāl Terai.

VIDYUJJĪHVA: literally, “lightning-longued”; a rākshasa magician employed by Rāvana to hypnotise and hallucinate Sītā.

VIJAYA: 1) a minister in the court of Rājā Daśharatha, 2) an auspicious occasion selected by astrologers for the performance of any religious rite.

VĪNĀ: “a musical instrument of India having usually four strings and a long bamboo fingerboard with moveable frets and a gourd resonator at each end” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary).

VINATĀ: daughter of Dakṣha; one of the wives of Kaśhyapa; mother of Garuḍa.

VINDHYA: mountain range in South India.

VIRADHA: a rākṣhaṣa who in a previous birth was a gandharva named Tumburu; he was the son of Kāla and Śhatahradā; he was killed by Rāma.

VIROCHANA: an anti-god, son of Prahlāda, also called Dṛiśhana.

VIŚHALA: name of a rākṣhaṣa.

VIŚHALYA: name of a rākṣhaṣa.

VIŚHṆU: literally, "the pervader"; the preserving aspect of the Hindu trinity Brahmā-Viṣṇu-Śhiva (Creator-Preserver-Destroyer). In his four arms, the conventional image of Viṣṇu holds a conch (lower right hand), a chakra (upper right), bow and lotus (upper left), and mace (lower left). There are however twenty-four different images of Viṣṇu each with different symbols: 1) Keśhava (long haired); 2) Nārāyana (universal refuge); 3) Mādhava (lord of knowledge); 4) Govinda (saviour of the earth); 5) Viṣṇu (he pervader); 6) Madhusūdana (destroyer of the anti-god Madhu); 7) Trivikrama (conqueror of the three worlds); 8) Vāmana (deserving of praise; the dwarf avatāra); 9) Śhrīdhara (bringer of prosperity); 10) Hṛiṣhikeśha (lord of the senses); 11) Padmanābha (lotus-navelled); 12) Dāmodara (self-controlled); 13) Sankarṣhana (the re-absorber); 14) Vāsudeva (the indweller); 15) Pradyumna (the most wealthy); 16) Aniruddha (the unchallenged); 17) Puruṣottama (best of men); 18) Adhokṣhaja (the centre of the universe); 19) Nṛsiṃha (man-lion); 20) Achyuta (never-stained); 21) Janārdana (reward-dispenser); 22) Upendra (Indra's brother); 23) Hari (grief-dispeller); 24) Kṛiṣhna (the dark-complexioned one). Rāma is the seventh of the nine avatāras of Viṣṇu. See avatāra.

VIŚHRAVAS: son of Pulastya; father of Kubera by the daughter of ṛishi Bharadvāja, and father of Rāvana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhīṣhana, and a daughter Śhūrpanakhā, by a rākṣhaṣī named Nikāṣhā or Keśhinī. The *Mahābhārata* gives a different account of the births, making Puṣhpotaṭā the mother of Rāvana and Kumbhakarna, Mālīnī the mother of Vibhīṣhana, and Rākā the mother of Khara and Śhūrpanakhā.

VIŚHVADEVAS: literally, "world-deities"; the Viśhvas are the sons of Viśhvā, daughter of Dakṣha. Their number varies, the maximum being thirteen: 1) Vasu (wealth); 2) Satya (truth); 3) Kratu (will power); 4) Dakṣha (skill); 5) Kāla (time); 6) Kāma (erotic feeling); 7) Dhṛiti (fortitude); 8) Kuru (name of an ancestor); 9) Purūravas (a sky-being); 10) Mādrava (exclamation of joy); 11) Rochaka (pleasantness); 12) Dhvani (nuance); 13) Dhuri (leadership).

VIŚHVAKARMA: "world-crafter"; the divine artificer of the gods, his daughter was married to Sūrya whose brilliance was so dazzling that Viśhvakarma sliced off one-eighth of his brightness on his lathe; from the scattered fragments he fashioned Viṣṇu's chakra, Śhiva's trident and other divine weapons.

VIŚAVĀMITRA: literally, 'unfriendly to the world'; famous ṛishi who by the strength of his tapasyā transformed himself from Kṣatriya to Brāhmin.

VIVAŚYAṬ: literally, "the shining one"; another name of Sūrya the Sun-god.

YAJÑA: literally, "sacrifice"; Hindu religious ritual.

YAJÑASHĀTRU, name of a rākṣhasa chief.

YAJUR: see Veda.

YAKṢHA: semi-divine beings, followers of the god of wealth Kubera. The females, Yakṣīs, are celebrated for their beauty, but the males are conspicuously ordinary.

YAKṢHINĪ: female Yakṣha or Yakṣhī.

YAMA: literally, "the binder"; the god of death; his father is the sun Vivasvat and his mother is Saranyū (cloud), daughter of Viśhvakarma; his brother is Manu the law-maker; his sister is Yamī who loved him so deeply that when he died the gods created Night (Yāminī) in order to console her. Yama is ugly-looking, dark-green-skinned and wears blood-red clothes. He carries a noose, staff, axe, sword and dagger, and rides a buffalo.

YAMUNĀ: Yama's sister Yamī appearing on the earth is called Yamunā. One of the sacred rivers of India, also called Kālindī because it has its source in the mountain called Kalinda; it joins the Gangā at Allāhābād.

YAYĀTI: the fifth king of the Lunar race, son of Nahuṣha; his sensuality and unfaithfulness to his wife Devayānī brought a curse of old age on him. He exchanged his old age with his son Puru's youth and was cast out of heaven by Indra for his pride.

YUDDHORNMATTA: name of a rākṣhasa warrior.

YUDDHAJIT: brother of Kaikeyī; Bharata's maternal uncle.

YUGA: one of the four ages of a Hindu world cycle each shorter and less righteous than the one preceeding' (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). The Kṛita-Yuga lasted 4800 god years, the Tretā-Yuga 3600, the Dvāpara-Yuga 2400, and the Kali-Yuga 1200 (each god-year equals 360 human years). The four Yugas therefore total 4,320,000 human years and form a Mahā-Yuga; ten thousand Mahā-Yugas make a Kalpa. We are presently in the Kali-Yuga where dharma declines; the *Rāmāyana* takes place in the Dvāpara-Yuga.

YUPAKṢHA: name of a rākṣhasa killed by Hanumān.

Acknowledgement

In addition to the books listed in the Bibliography, the following proved helpful in its preparation: *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, "Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Greek, Latin, Gothic, German, Anglo-Saxon, and other Cognate Indo-European Languages by Sir Monier-Williams" (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1888); *Hindu World* by Benjamin Walker (two volumes, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1968); *Hindu Polytheism* by Alain Daniélou (Pantheon Books, Random House, New York, 1964); *A Companion to Sanskrit Literature* by Surésh Chandra Banerji (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971); *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* by John Dowson (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 10th ed., 1961). The notes and commentaries in the Sanskrit and Hindi editions of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* published by the Gītā Press were also consulted; Hari Prasād Śāstri's glossaries in his three-volume translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* provided another valuable source of reference.

Bibliography

Romeśh Chunder Dutt (translator)

THE RĀMĀYAṆA & THE MAHĀBHĀRATA (J.M. Dent, 1910)

Romeśh Dutt's "translation" of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Dent Everyman's Library first appeared with a frontispiece by Stuart Hardy in the Temple Classics series in 1900, described as a "condensation in English verse." It is in metronomic *Locksley-Hall* hexameter, arranged in twelve books: "*Sītā-Svayamvara* (The Bridal of Sita), *Vana-Gamana-Ādeśa* (The Banishment), *Daśa-ratha-Vīyoga* (The Death of the King), *Rāma-Bharata-Sambāda* (The Meeting of the Princes), *Pañchavaṭī* (On the Banks of the Godāvarī), *Sītā-Haraṇa* (Sītā Lost), *Kiṣkīndha* (In the Nilgiri Mountains), *Sītā-Sandeśa* (Sītā Discovered), *Rāvaṇa-Sabhā* (The Council of War), *Yuddha* (The War in Ceylon), *Rājya-Abhiṣheka* (Rama's Return and Consecration), *Aśva-Medha* (Sacrifice of the Horse)."

The "Translator's Epilogue" explains Dutt's technique: "I have selected those sections or cantos which tell the leading incidents of the Epic, and have translated the whole or main portions of them, and these selected passages are linked together by short notes." The 24,000 śhlokas of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are reduced to a convenient and manageable 2,000, because "the modern reader has not the patience of the Hindu listener of the old school."

For those who can still honestly enjoy unvarying hexametric verse, Dutt is a good introduction to the main story of the epic. His introduction is eminently useful, specially in its percipient analyses on the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s characters. "The *Rāmāyaṇa* excels . . . not in the delineation of warriors and warlike incidents It is in the delineation of domestic incidents, domestic affections, domestic jealousies, which are appreciated by the prince and the peasant alike, that the *Rāmāyaṇa* bases its appeal to the hearts of the million in India Sorrow and suffering, trial and endurance, are a part of the Hindu ideal of a Perfect Life of righteousness."

Romeśh Dutt felt nearly a hundred years ago that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was "still a living tradition and a living faith" - it embodied "the domestic and the religious life of ancient India, with all its tenderness and sweetness, its endurance and devotion." For this reason he concentrates on scenes and episodes that depict the faithfulness and self-abnegation of Sītā, Rāma's duty towards Daśharatha, and the brotherly dedication of Bharata. He is convinced that the "ideal of life was joy and beauty and gladness in ancient Greece; the ideal of life was piety and endurance and devotion in ancient India."

There are only two verse-translations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—Griffith's and Romeśh Dutt's. Both provide convincing evidence to show that it is almost impossible to find a satisfactory English verse-equivalence for the *anuṣṭubh śhloka* of Vālmiki's epic.

Arvind Kumar

A STUDY IN THE ETHICS OF THE BANISHMENT OF SĪTA (Saritā Magazine, New Delhi, 1961)

The July 1957 issue of *Saritā*, a Hindi monthly, printed a poem by Arvind

Kumar titled *Rām Kā Antardvandra* (*The Inner Conflict of Rāma*) in which he focused on Rāma's anguish before and after the fire-test of Sītā. The subject is a delicate one, and orthodox Hindu sensibilities tend to get easily upset and offended if any aspersion, direct or indirect, is cast on the divine nature of Rāma. "Resolutions against the poem were passed by all Ārya Samāj, Sanātan Dharm Sabhā, Hindu Mahā Sabhā branches all over India," and the Delhi Administration finally banned the offending issue of *Sarita* and launched criminal proceedings under Section 295 (A) of the Indian Penal Code against the author and the publisher Viśhwa Nāth.

A celebrated court case ensued; the resident magistrate found the accused guilty and sentenced them to pay a fine of Rs. 250 each or undergo two months' rigorous imprisonment; an appeal was filed before the Additional District and Sessions Judge, Delhi, who acquitted the accused.

This brochure of 54 pages continues the debate in "The True Sanātanist Spirit of Eternal Enquiry." The first section deals with the "*Rāmāyana's Public Image*", and succeeding sections take up "Rām as our Hero", "Sītā's Sorrows", "Rām the Human Being", "Rām's Doubts", "Attack on Laṅkā", "Rām Assumes Poses", "Rām and Śhūrpanakhā", "Daśharatha". The tone is intelligent, critical, rational; and Śhri Kumār gives copious quotations from the text as well as references to other poets and scholars who have used the *Rāmāyana* as the basis for controversial interpretation. Only the diehard conservative will find Śhri Kumār's daring views dangerously subversive or heretical.

N.R. Navlekar

A NEW APPROACH TO THE RĀMĀYANA (Privately published, undated)

This is a remarkable book; its 300 pages constitute an unremitting examination of the numerous character inconsistencies, contradictions, and irregularities in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyana*. Some readers will treat it as an irreverent attack, but Śhri Navlekar's aim is to interpret the epic as a record of Āryan conquest of the Southern Indian peninsula and he marshalls his arguments with all the cogency and effectiveness of a military commander conducting a superbly planned strategy. No reader of Vālmiki can afford to miss this irritating, obsessively precise and detailed, yet stimulating analysis. With a little more attention to syntax and style, and some prudent shortening where Śhri Navlekar allows his pet theory to become stridently prolix, this book could become a model of the modern, critical, sensitively intelligent approaches to the *Rāmāyana*. It is not surprising that no professional publisher risked printing it over fifteen years ago, fearing possibly too hostile a public reaction.

Śhri Navlekar warns in advance that "some of his statements are likely to jar on the reader's mind and raise a storm of protest; hence in self-defence as well as to ensure belief" he has thought it "necessary to quote from Vālmiki and others in the original."

Seven questions worry the author:

(1) Why did "the gods deliberately bring about a catastrophe in Ayodhyā on the eve of Rāma's installation? They had sent him from heaven mainly to kill Rāvaṇa on earth, and he could have fulfilled their wishes even after ascending the throne Why did the gods adopt the tortuous course of first corrupting the mind of Kaikeyī, then sending Daśharatha to tragic death . . . Daśharatha dying in tearful agony, Bharata living in protracted turmoil, Rāma wandering without a home, Kauśhalyā withering in helpless widowhood, Kaikeyī branded with indelible disgrace, and Sītā doomed to endless trials!"

(2) "How did Daśharatha happen to forget Kaikeyī's son and Sītāji's father on the eve of Rāma's installation? Shortness of time can never be accepted as an explanation, because he is said to have arranged in time to invite kings and chieftains from afar to grace this auspicious occasion. And why Rāma too did not choose to point out this glaring error of omission to his father, though he loved Bharata most and revered Janaka best?"

(3) "If Sītā is to be extolled as a model of wifely devotion for saying that her place was always by the side of her husband . . . what shall we say to [*sic*] Urmilā who stayed behind Lakṣhmaṇa? Why did she not, like Sītā, insist that she also would share the weal and woe of her husband, be he a slave of Rāma in exile or his second-in-command in sovereignty?"

(4) "Why did Rāma hide from Shūrpanakhā the fact that Lakṣhmaṇa also like him was a married man? Why did he not tell her straightaway that neither of them, being strict monogamists, could ever accept her hand?"

(5) "Why did Rāma kill Vāli surreptitiously when, as the Supreme Being and Champion of righteousness, he should have punished him openly and honourably, without a blot on his own fair name? If Vāli deserved no mercy for his immoral conduct, in what way could Sugrīva be said to be superior to him in morality?—*he* who, while his own heroic elder brother was at close grips with his enemy elsewhere, had usurped the throne of Kiṣkindha and dragged his helpless wife upon his incestuous bed,—*he* who, after assisting in the assassination of his liege lord, had forced his mournful widow into concubinage!"

(6) "Does Vibhīṣhaṇa really deserve the praise that has been showered on him by all poets? Does not his loyalty to Rāma mean at bottom his treachery to Rāvaṇa whose salt he ate? If he did not approve of his brother's policy, all that he could honourably do was to hold himself aloof from him, to non-cooperate with him in the war that followed Should we call him a magnanimous soul or a despicable turncoat?"

(7) "How is it that Rāma ordered a fire-ordeal for Sītā only in Laṅkā but not in Ayodhyā? . . . Why should he consign her innocent soul to the horrors of disgrace as an unchaste woman and his own noble self to the torments of remorse . . . ?"

These seven questions provide the starting-point for a new view of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* plot. Apparently a very devious plot indeed, for it involves the substitution of Sītā by Shabari—in fact, it is Śhrī Navlekar's contention, argued with relentless skill and presented with Hitchkovian precision, that Rāvaṇa

abducted Shabari, not Sitā, unaware of Rāma's clever ploy.

It is best, however, not to reveal too much of this suspenseful mystery. There is no doubt that Śhrī Navlekar's book makes exciting reading—and no doubt either that it is impeccable in its scholarliness. A whodunit and howdunit for pucca pundits.

C. Rājagopālachārī

RĀMĀYAṆA (Bhāratiya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1979)

First published in the Bhavan's Book University series in 1951, Rājagopālachārī's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* entered its nineteenth edition in 1979. It is difficult to explain its continuing popularity in India and abroad, unless one attributes it largely to the paucity of good condensed translations of Vālmīki's epic readily available in English.

It is not a translation from the Sanskrit. In his preface "Rājāji" explained, "I wrote the Tāmil original of this book in a series of weekly chapters in *Kalki* If readers find pathos and beauty in spite of the defects necessarily involved in translating such matter into a foreign tongue, it is all Vālmīki's magic. The chapters were written for Tāmil readers and followed a pattern of earnest and intimate talk rather than of written prose."

Vālmīki's "magic" must lie in the remarkable strength and appeal of his narrative—the "plot", as it were, of the epic—because the characters emerge a little soggy in Rājāji's doggedly didactic re-telling, which is more often than not sermon and Polonius-style pontification and platitudinising rather than the claimed "earnest and intimate talk." The English is often artificial and labour-ed, sometimes impossibly so.

It is a tribute to Vālmīki's story-telling skill that his epic survives such heavy-handedness. What is decidedly odd is that a person of Rājāji's undoubted intellectual and literary eminence, with such psychological percipience and wide experience of the complexities of Indian social life and politics, should have produced such an inexpert version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Chācun ā son gout*.

Hari Prasād Shāstrī (translator)

THE RĀMĀYAṆA OF VĀLMĪKI (Śhānti Sadan, London, 1953)

The first edition of this complete translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in three volumes appeared in 1953, and a second revised edition was published in 1962. William Theodore de Bary and Ainslie T. Embree, editors of *A Guide to Oriental Classics*, a dependable bibliography, describe this as "the best available prose translation. The rendition is fairly reliable as well as readable. Detailed glossaries of Sanskrit proper names and epithets are included in each volume." Considering that the only other available full translations are those by Ralph T.H. Griffith, and Mākhān Lāl Sen, and the anonymous prose version of the Gītā Press, this assessment seems reasonable, notwithstanding the fact that

Hari Prasād Śhāstri fails to provide a śhloka-by-śhloka collation which is a convenience eminently to be desired in any complete rendering.

The great advantage of the śhāstri translation is not only the glossaries comprehensive but unfortunately without any diacritical marks) but also the appendices which provide variant readings of the text as well as information about interpolations. The Uttara-Kāṇḍa in Volume Three is translated in its entirety including all the śhlokas that are considered to be spurious. It is therefore a pity that the four-page introduction provides only the briefest of entries to Vālmiki's epic and does no better than reproduce the existing pious approaches to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Shāstri-jī remarks that "for every Hindu, Śhrī Rāma and Sītā are the ideal man and woman, the model husband and wife. Śhrī Rāma is an incarnation of God, the One all-pervading Principle of Truth and Intelligence, and what higher patterns for one's life could be chosen than this man of perfect virtue, a lover of truth, compassionate, just, benevolent, valorous and chivalrous?" He adds that the epic may also be interpreted as an allegory, where "symbolically Rāma and Rāvaṇa represent the forces of light and darkness operating in the human heart, as well as in the world The real triumph of man means conquest of the forces of darkness." Shāstri-jī omits any reference to the work's psychological complexity and to the controversies that rage over the epic of Vālmiki.

The translation is marked by smooth and easy rendering in modern English; no attempt has been made to retain the lyrical richness of the original. Shāstri-jī explains in his introduction that "it is not possible to reproduce the beauty of the original form" adding, however, that "the true spirit of Vālmiki's masterpiece is here preserved and for those who have vision, the whole significance of its spiritual purpose will be apparent." The "true spirit" of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an extremely elusive essence, but what can safely be said of the Shāstri translation is that it retains the religious quality of Vālmiki but sacrifices the literary in the process.

V. Sītāramiāh

VĀLMIKI RĀMĀYAṆA (Sāhitya Akāḍemī, New Delhi, 1972)

"This brochure deals with the human aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* only," says Śhrī Sītāramiāh in his foreword, because "the present writer is not a scholar nor religion-minded." Though not exactly a brochure (it runs to two hundred pages), it is indeed an excellent introduction to the epic, neatly organised into six chapters. The first introduces the epic, the second deals with "The Main Story", the third discusses "Types of Family Life", the fourth takes up the epic's "Personae" (which is one of the strong points of this study), the fifth focuses on "A Few Episodes" and the last is a stimulating presentation of the beauties and subtleties of "The Poetry of Vālmiki".

Every conclusion arrived at, and every interpreted nuance of character, is done after detailed reference to the text. The quotations from Sanskrit—and

they are numerous—are given in roman transliteration. A great deal of love's labour has gone into the preparation of this book. Śhrī Sītāramiāh not only believes that the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s "words and lines haunt the memory and play sweetly on the tongue," he puts his faith in practice by culling memorable śhlokas and presenting them in significant contexts for the benefit of the uninitiated reader. A particularly interesting section discusses the śhloka pattern and dares to suggest that even Vālmiki is capable of producing examples of "jaw-splitting harshness"; he adds, however, that when Vālmiki is in his element, "there is nobody to approach him. The movement of the stanzas is natural and unimpeded; the voice has depth as well as loftiness, the pictures are clear and straight; well shaped and concrete, realising every moment and situation." One is prepared to trust the taste of a sensitive critic who has the courage to say that often Vālmiki repeats the names of trees, birds and flowers so that "they become mere lists", and that "occasionally one gets lapses" such as when Vālmiki says that "lotuses and lilies grow on flowing water which becomes later on a cramping poetic convention."

It is in his character studies that Śhrī Sītāramiāh excels. He pinpoints Rāma's "unflinching purpose . . . not sparing itself it does not spare others Though it would like to love and be loved, it keeps itself above love . . . living with it is difficult and exacts obedience. A person like Hanumān or Lakṣhmaṇa has to be content to render it service, a Bharata has to compromise; a Sītā who can measure up to it in stature gets sacrificed." Another fascinating character cameo, presented in five pages, is that of Rāvana and his "magnificent personality": this tries to suggest that sometimes Rāvana is more sinned against than sinning.

The Rt. Hon. V.S. Śrīnivāsa Śāstrī

LECTURES ON THE RĀMĀYANA (Madrās Sanskrit Academy, 1949)

No praise is too high for this remarkable collection of thirty lectures on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which were delivered at the Sanskrit Academy in Madras by the Rt. Hon. V.S. Śāstrī in 1944. When Mahātmā Gāndhī visited Madrās he met Śhrī Śāstrī at the General Hospital and requested him to rework and revise his lectures for the general public. This book was published in 1949 and has run into four reprints, including a revised edition in 1961.

A more systematic intelligent and sensitive introduction to the spirit and characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* will be hard to find among whatever has been written on Vālmiki's epic in English. An extraordinary quality of concentrated scholarship carried lightly pervades the book. "When I read the book (*Rāmāyaṇa*)," explained Śhrī Śāstrī once, "I read that book and do nothing else; my whole mind is devoted to it. A hard-hearted man like me, I read it, and strange to say, there is not a page that does not bring tears to my eyes! Any fine sentiment, any tender feeling, any affection between brother and brother, any reunion of beings that have been separated for a time, aye, any homage paid to friendship, to gratitude or to any of those eternal abiding

virtues of human character brings tears into my eyes! I stop; I cannot go on, I have to wait and wipe my eyes and then go on. Why do I do that? A hardened man of the world, why do I do that? Why has it that effect on me? I suppose it is because deep down in my nature, going to strata which perhaps in my waking life I shall never touch, there is a spirit of utmost reverence and affection for those great characters."

The reverence and affection never stand in the way of an objective and critical presentation, which is indeed one of the intellectual delights of this book. In a foreword, Śhrī T.R. Venkaṭarāma Śāstrī points out that when the lectures were first delivered, they caused "hurt" to some "devout persons" because of "their professed object of presenting Śhrī Rāma in a purely human aspect, ignoring His place among the Great Avatāras or Incarnations." The stimulating manner in which Śhrī Śāstrī blends religious respect with secular questioning can be seen specially in the chapters dealing with Rāma's killing of Vāli and repudiation of Sītā. Taking a cue from A.C. Bradley's painstakingly intimate interpretations of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Śhrī Śāstrī convincingly suggests that Rāma's inexplicable treatment of Sītā was sparked off by his fierce adherence to a Kṣatriyan code of feudal ethics by which a high-born male's sense of aggrieved honour justified extremes of jealousy towards a wife, the charge in this case being that Sītā had been in close physical proximity with Rāvana; in fact, this Othello-like jealousy is what apparently drives Rāma to vindicate his personal and family name publicly by subjecting Sītā to the fire ordeal.

The lecture on Sītā is equally sensitive and challenging and Śhrī Śāstrī does not hesitate to bring out the self-confident and occasionally stubborn elements in her character, but again he attributes these to her Kṣatriyan dignity and nobility. Rāvana is sketched with sympathy in spite of references to his cruelty and cunning. The total effect is of deep learning and detailed analysis buttressed by copious apt quotations from the Sanskrit text.

This is a carefully planned and lovingly researched book, with many more virtues of commission than errors of omission. It might appear carping to point to venial weaknesses, but one wonders why Śhrī Śāstrī has not a single word to say about Rāma's inexcusable killing of the Shūdra ascetic Shāmbūka unless it be on the ground that he considers the episode an interpolation. Śhrī Śāstrī's concern is chiefly with character interpretation; he does not take up textual analysis or the question of Rāma's historicity. Within his chosen area of study, however, he is positively brilliant and almost succeeds in doing to the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* what Bradley did to Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Lear and Antony. Surprising and sad, therefore, that this splendid book remains relatively little-known and is hard to procure even when in print.

Mākhān Lāl Sen (translator)

THE RĀMĀYAṆA (Oriental Publishing Co., Calcutta, 1927)

Though described on the title page as "translated from the original of Vāl-

miki" and as "a modernised version in English prose", this rendering is neither a translation nor really in any way "modern". It is a free paraphrase done in a haphazard and inaccurate manner, and its often stilted style and approach are more likely to mislead than inform the common reader on the true form and spirit of Vālmiki's epic.

The reasons that led Mākhan Lāl Sen to produce this three-volume adaptation-cum-interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* masquerading as a translation can be found in his introduction. He admits that there are many things in the epic "that will ever perplex a questioning reader", such as the question: "Who are the rakshasas?" If they are a non-Aryan primitive people, how is it that Lanka has such a high degree of civilisation, "in some points even superior to that of the Aryan capital"?

Another disturbing question is: "Who are the *vanaras*?" Are they "anthropoid apes", "Darwin's missing link", or "the aborigines of the Deccan?" The fact is that the "devotion, loyalty, intelligence, love of truth, high sense of morality and skill they exhibit are rare . . . even in our present civilised age."

Finally, the "arms and weapons" described in the epic: "are these the mere fabrications of a hyper-sensitive eastern mind . . . or is there some substratum of truth underneath them"?

Mākhan Lāl Sen resolved these difficulties by convincing himself that much of the matter was interpolated and woven "into the main texture of the poem." So he took upon himself "the painful necessity of applying our (*sic*) irreverent scissors in pruning down literary prolixity and mere verbosity in many places . . . This is an audacity, we admit . . . but we have ventured to expunge all verbosity and unnecessary details for which most of the modern readers have little taste . . ."

This, then, is the "modernisation" that Sen undertook as his task; as he puts it, "herein lies our justification for the present publication of the Epic." He abbreviates, and excises, though prudently: "cuts that hurt popular sentiments are improper, if not impertinent" (he grants though that he has been "guilty of one such offence", though he does not name it).

He does not follow the canto (*sarga*) divisions of Vālmiki, but chooses to make his own chapters—a confusing experience for any reader who wishes to refer the "translation" to the original Sanskrit text. The entire project seems to have been a great loss of time and energy.

THE VĀLMĪKI-RĀMĀYAṆA (English Translation) (Gītā Press, Gorakhpur, 1960-1972)

In December 1960 the Gītā Press, publishers of religious literature in Sanskrit and Hindi at popular, subsidised prices, decided to bring out a careful translation of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in regular instalments of special supplements of their monthly English journal *Kalyāṇa-Kalpataru*, whose very reasonable annual subscription was Rs. 4.50 (a little more than 50 US cents) a month.

The Controlling Editor of this project was Hanumānprasād Poddār and the Editor was C.L. Goswāmī.

The Editor's "Apologia" to the first issue (December 1960), which supplied the Sanskrit text and a close English version and commentary in 227 double crown pages, described the *RāmJyāṇa* of Vālmīki as "not only the oldest extant poem (in the world) but also an exquisite specimen of poetic excellence and richness of imagery. It stands unique in its moral appeal and portrays characters that can easily pass as the highest models of ethical perfection." More superlatives suggestive of extreme pious devotion were added: "Apart from the fact that the hero of the poem is a historical personage who has been venerated in this holy land from the hoary past as God Himself descended in human form, he stands out in the world's history as the perfect embodiment of human values and even so his partner in life occupies the first rank among the women of the world as the highest embodiment of feminine virtues and excellences."

"Highest", "first rank", "perfect" applied to Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* led naturally to the conclusion that "the poem deserves to be widely and reverently read by all lovers of healthy literature especially in this age of rank materialism, when the ethical standards of average humanity have fallen very low and the world is torn by cold war and is showing signs of widespread rupture and disintegration."

Dedicating "our humble attempt to the feet of the divine Rāma, whose grace has sustained us throughout in our uphill task," the Editors embarked on their mission "to bring the treasures of this noble heritage of our ancient land within the reach of the English-knowing public."

Monumental dedication and application notwithstanding, the project was never finished. The last instalment, consisting of the first fortyone *saṅgas* of the Uttara-Kāṇḍa, appeared in December 1972 in Volume XXXIII Number 12 of *Kalyāṇa-Kalpataru*. "Like its predecessor," apologised the Editor, "this Special Number too has tottered to its destination in two winters instead of one . . . God-willing the translation of the remaining Cantos from XLII to CXI will come to light in the next year's Special Number." It never did, the magazine folded up soon after. This was inevitable with the death of the presiding genius of the project, Hanumānprasād Poddār, in March 1971, "after a protracted and serious illness." In October 1970 the Editor had announced, "Thank God, the translation has now been completed." A great pity, therefore, that the public will apparently never get to see the entire version in print.

By literary standards it is not a remarkable rendering, for it is often marred by prolixity, Victorian circumlocution, and justificatory piety (the anonymous group of translators insist on making Rāma and Sītā vegetarian by translating the Sanskrit word for "flesh" to mean the flesh of a fruit rather than meat). But there are many passages marked by clean elegance, straight and stirring speech, and excellent literal equivalence. Unfortunately, the noble attempt is all too often spoiled by a plethora of explanatory parentheses which block the speed and flow of the narrative. The result is that, while it was intended for

the common reader, the Gītā Press rendering is useful only to the scholar and text-conscious collator. The poetry, drama, and pointed ethical message get lost; the religious seriousness and subtleties are retained.

S.N. Vyās

INDIA IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA AGE (Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi 1967)

Subtitled "A Study of the Social and Cultural Conditions in Ancient India as Described in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*", this superbly documented volume offers an encyclopaedic entry into the world of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The twenty-five chapters cover every conceivable aspect of life during the *Rāmāyaṇa* period with the exception of military pursuits. Two excellent chapters describe in great detail the *rākṣhasas* and *vānaras*; four chapters deal with love, marriage and morals, woman in home, and woman in society. Other chapters take up education rites and rituals, hermit culture, the Āryan way of life, the household philosophy of life, literature, science, art and aesthetics, and even town planning. Dr. Vyās has comprehensively delved into Vālmiki's epic and come up with a book which fills a too-long-empty gap in *Rāmāyaṇa* studies.

The bulk of the work is a result of several years of research for a doctoral thesis. The remarkable quality of this thesis is that it avoids being "merely academic or scholastic". As Dr. Vyās explains, "Effort has been made to include as many topics as possible which should facilitate a proper understanding of moral, social and material aspects of the Indian way of life in the *Rāmāyaṇa* age." Since "there is no dearth of books and papers on the glory of Rāma, his superhuman conduct and character and on the moral grandeur of the epic", the need for an "objective study" presented in a "critical and analytical way" was long felt. This book admirably, in three hundred and fifty pages, makes available to an interested student an extraordinarily large number of facts and details presented in an easily assimilable organised fashion. It has one hundred and twenty-six line drawings, a map, and a useful bibliography which lists some helpful but not very widely known books on the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, such as P.C. Dharma's *The Rāmāyaṇa Polity* (Madrās, 1941), N.A. Gore's *A Bibliography of the Rāmāyaṇa* (Poonā, 1943), Benjamin Khān's *The Concept of Drama in Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (Delhi, 1965), K.S. Rāmaswāmī Śāstri's *Studies in the Rāmāyaṇa* (Barodā, 1944), P.P.S. Śāstri's *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (Madrās, 1935), C.V. Vaidya's *The Riddle of the Rāmāyaṇa* (Bombay, 1906), and Satya Vrat's *The Rāmāyaṇa—A Linguistic Study* (Delhi 1964).

The following books will prove useful to a serious student of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*; they are listed here in brief annotation which is not necessarily an index of their importance:

Mathurām Bhoothalingam: *A Voyage Through the Rāmāyaṇa* (Bhāratiya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1980). "The whole point of my interpretation," Shrimatī Bhoothalingam once told the critic J. Rādhakṛṣṇan, "is to suggest that Vālmiki attempts to portray man's voyage within himself towards inner harmony." See also Shrimatī Bhoothalingam's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for children, lucidly and absorbingly narrated, titled *The Story of Rāma* (Asia, Bombay, 1964).

William Buck: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* (University of California Press, 1976; Mentor Paperback, 1977). A free re-telling of the epic in modern English.

Maurice Collis: *Quest for Sītā* (Faber, London, 1946). Subtitled "Of Rāvana the Dark Angel, and his Paradise at Lankā; of Hanumān and the Divine Vultures Jatāyus and Sampātī", this is an offbeat re-telling of the epic, with decidedly peculiar drawings by Mervyn Peake.

Manmatha Nāth Dutt: *The Rāmāyaṇa* (Calcutta, 1892-94). A prose rendering of the complete Vālmiki text, unfortunately long out of print.

G.S. Ghurye. *The Legacy of the Rāmāyaṇa* (Popular Prakashan, 1979). Contains long studies of the characters of Rāma and Sītā.

P. Lāl (transcreator): *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (New Directions, New York, 1964; 4th edition, revised, 1978). Includes six plays by six Sanskrit play-wrights (Shūdraka, Viśhākadatta, Kālīdāsa, Bhāsa, Harṣha, and Bhavabhūti, whose *Uttara-Rāma-Charita* deals with the purifying remorse of Rāma after the fire-trial of Sītā).

Aubrey Menen: *Rāma Retold* (Scribner's, New York, 1954; published as *The Rāmāyaṇa* in England). A wacky satirical take-off by an irreverent novelist.

R.K. Nārāyaṇ: *The Rāmāyaṇa* (Indian Thought, Mysore, 1970). Sister Niveditā (Margaret E. Noble) & Ānanda K. Coomāraswāmy: *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (Harrap, London, 1913). Narrates the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in over a hundred pages.

V. Rāghavan (editor): *The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia* (Sāhitya Akāḍemī, New Delhi, 1980). A 750-page anthology of essays tracing the influence of the epic in Asia.

